THE TREASURE OF BIG WATERS

RIDGWELL CULLUM

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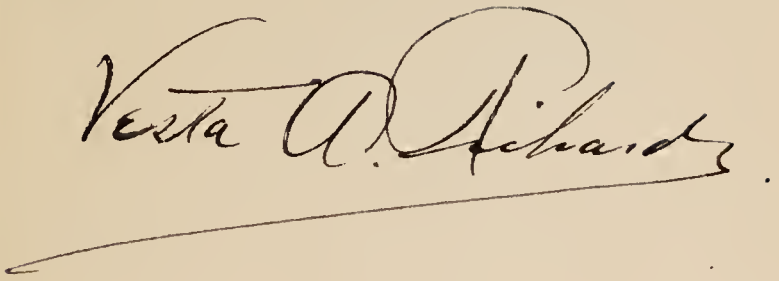
The Treasure of
Big Waters



RIDGWELL CULLUM

The Treasure of Big Waters
The Tiger of Cloud River
The Mystery of the Barren Lands
The Wolf Pack

THE TREASURE OF BIG WATERS

By RIDGWELL CULLUM

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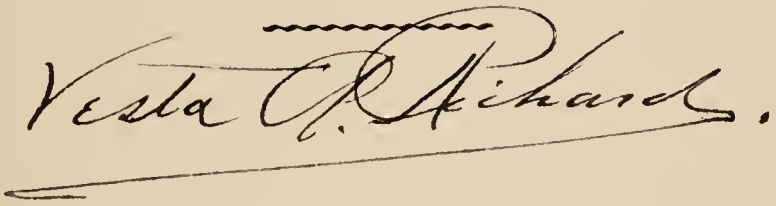
To

MARY CICELY HALL CAINE

the happy quaintnesses of whose child personality suggested all that is best in the character of Mary Melrose.



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Contents

PART I ANDY AND MARY

CHAP.		PAGE
I	The Breed of the Northland	11
II	The Kingdom of Simon Duchette	20
III	Big Waters	32
IV	A Matter of Swimming	42
V	Disaster	50
VI	Comrades in Affliction	60
VII	Oolinak in the Night	68
VIII	Stark Evil	75
IX	Sword Play	81
X	Simon Decides	91
XI	Larry Carries On	97
XII	The Mist on the River	104
XIII	At Bedtime	112
XIV	Father Dan Girds Up His Loins	117
XV	The Railhead at Athaba	129
XVI	Silt Lake	138

PART II MARY

I	Two Years Later	149
II	For Andy	157
III	A Dead End	163
IV	Dutch Becomes Active	170
V	Mary Realizes Her Womanhood	179
VI	Mary Reveals Herself	190
VII	Mary Plans the Great Adventure	197
VIII	Mary Claims Her Heritage	205

IX	Dutch Wonders	212
X	The Vultures Gather	221
XI	The Home-coming	230
XII	The Wood-store	240
XIII	Of One Accord	250
XIV	Andy's Wooing	255
XV	The Cache	268
XVI	The Hold-up	283
XVII	The Retreat	292
XVIII	Mary Presents Her Bill	305

The Treasure of Big Waters

Part I

Andy and Mary

CHAPTER I

THE BREED OF THE NORTHLAND

The boy was bored. But the girl was, at least for the time being, supremely content.

They were down at the river, which was their common playground at all seasons of the year. In winter, when it was frozen to its bed, and when snow piled like miniature mountains about its banks, and temperatures dropped to fifty and sixty degrees below zero, it served them as well as now when the summer sun was blazing down upon the world with sub-tropical intensity.

The boy was standing up, in the shortest of "shorts," and an old worsted jersey out of which he was fast growing. For the rest, he was bareheaded and barefoot, and his well-muscled limbs were stained with a mixture of sun-tan and river dirt. His shock of hair flamed like a ruddy beacon fire, and his laughing blue eyes gazed out of a setting so deeply freckled that the real fairness of his skin was quite obscured.

His boredom inspired mischief. He was swinging a gee-pole horizontally over the girl's head as she sat on a bowlder surrounded by five great trail dogs. It was an endeavor to see how near he could approach her head without absolute disaster.

The little girl glanced up at the swinging pole.

"Quit it, you Andy!" she cried, sharply, and again bent over the crowding dogs.

She was a slim little creature, lank of body for her years, which, as yet, did not quite total eleven. She, too, wore the scantiest of garments. She was clad in a single loose frock that had long since passed its best usefulness. It was cotton stuff, and failed to reach below her rather knobbly knees. It was without sleeves, and had a low neck. All her exposed flesh was burned a deep brown. She had long, fair hair that hung about her shoulders in heavy curls. Her eyes were big and blue, and in their depths at all times they had a curious, solemn sort of thoughtful smile.

"You quit fooling with your rotten old malemutes, then,"

the boy retorted. But it was noticeable that the pole promptly came to rest at his side.

Mary Melrose looked up again, and her gaze was steady and measuring.

"They're not 'rotten,' and they're not 'old malemutes,' " she denied, coolly. "They're the swellest huskies north of 60°. Uncle Dan says so. And he knows better than a fool boy."

Andy Forsyth considered profoundly.

"I'm not a 'fool boy.' And they're curs of dogs, anyway," he argued, after awhile. "Simon's are the best dogs anywhere. His are speed dogs, not Mission huskies. They could beat the world. And they cost hundreds an' hundreds an' hundreds of dollars! They didn't grow just anyhow—like yours."

Mary's lips set ominously.

"Uncle Dan bred these himself," she said. Then, with curt finality: "He knows."

"Oh, does he?"

Andy's laughter had gone out of his good-natured face. He stared up at the cloudless sky as though for inspiration. And Mary followed the direction of his gaze.

Legions of migrant wild-fowl were winging northward, heading for those precious, secret breeding-grounds which lie deep-hidden and safe from discovery somewhere amidst the fields of the Arctic pack ice. The heavens were alive with battalions of them, flying in perfect formation. Mary watched them with all a child's yearning and imagination stirring.

It was a day of real Arctic summer, a day which left the northern world forgetful of the long, black terror of winter. Life was everywhere. It was there in the smoothly flowing river, and in the gently ruffled bosom of the great lake. It was in the carpet of tiny Arctic flowers, striving with their brilliant hues to mask the grimness of an ungracious world. It was in the fierce hum of newly hatched mosquitoes, and in the soft drone of myriads of black flies.

Then, on the thrusting promontory of low, windswept land, at the confluence of river and lake, where stood the many rough buildings of old Fort George, and the smaller

structures of Father Dany Le Mar's Mission, it was in the colorful concourse of natives, Indian and Eskimo, with their watercraft, their papooses, their women, their tepees, assembled for the annual trade of their precious catch of winter pelts. But more surely than all it was in the blistering heat of a brazen sun.

With the going out of the ice, and the passing of the spring freshet, the torrent of Hope River had abated to its pleasant, normal level. Now, too, its waters had been restored to their usual crystal clarity. The heavy spring silt from the glacial field at its headwaters had been poured into the bowels of the great, freshwater, inland sea that was Lake Whitewater.

The stream of the river was broad, and sluggish, and very deep. It lay cradled between wide, gently inclining foreshores that were like the wide-flung sides of a shallow pan. They were bowlder-strewn and deeply shingled like an ocean beach. And beyond them lay scattered bluffs of wind-swept spruce and black pine.

Right down at the water's edge a water barrel was set up on a stout sled, whose runners had been augmented by a pair of pine rollers to serve as wheels in the absence of winter's elements. It was the sled to which Mary's dogs were hooked, and it was backed into the water for the barrel's filling.

Two women were standing ankle-deep in the chill stream, dipping water with dippers that were no better than buckets secured at the ends of sapling poles.

The missionized Eskimo, Jane Hesther, was short and very fat. She was clad in a cotton waist of vivid patterns, and a rusty cloth skirt tucked well above her bare, plump knees. She was working with placid enthusiasm and perspiring energy. Her broad face, with its slightly slanting eyes, was shining with sweat.

On the other side of the barrel, the half-breed, Trudie, was doing no more than fulfilling communal obligations. She was quite without the other's enthusiasm. But then Trudie lived in the full consciousness of her blood superiority over Jane Hesther. And, besides, this barrel supplied the needs of Father Dany Le Mar's Mission, which concerned her only

for casual religious purposes. Her interest lay in the other barrel which was standing empty nearby. The liquid requirements of those she served in the primitive home of the white mining engineer, Larry Forsyth, were all-sufficient for her.

After Mary's rebuke, Andy considered the two women at the water barrel. And presently laughter returned to his cheerful face.

"Let's mush the dogs, Mary," he said, eagerly, in a low tone. "It'll make Jane Hesther real mad! She'll chase us with the dipper. Then we can push her in the river, and pretend it was an accident. She's so fat she can't sink! Fat floats. It's grease."

Benjie, the leader of the dog team, was sprawled with his great forepaws on Mary's lap. One of the child's brown hands was thrust within his wolfish jaws. The dog was mouthing it gently with fangs that could have severed it from its skinny arm in one slash. She was stroking his wolfish ears with her other hand while the rest of the dogs crowded about, nuzzling her jealously.

"No," the girl replied, without looking up. "That's our barrel. We'll mush them if you like when they're filling yours."

The cold reception of the boy's mischief stirred him to frank rebellion. He stooped and picked up his gee-pole.

"You're a fool kid," he cried, angrily. "I'll mush 'em myself! Ho, you! Benjie! Peter! Sly! Mush!"

The dogs were on their feet in an instant. They saw the raised gee-pole. But instead of heading into his tugs Benjie bared his teeth and snarled.

Mary leaped to her feet, lank, straight, angular. There was a tense moment. Then down came her hand with all her power on Benjie's muzzle, and the scold of her voice was furious. The snarl died in the dog's throat. The lifted lips dropped on the instant. It crouched submissively, and the other dogs looked on with pretended indifference.

"You fool boy! You'll never get sense, Andy!" Mary cried, her little face a shade pale, and her eyes troubled. "You can't mush my dogs! No one can, but me, an' Oolinak.

Benjie hates boys. If you raise that pole at him he'll tear you to bits!"

Mary sat down again. And, in a moment, Benjie's good humor was restored under her caresses. Andy laid his pole aside. He was disturbed but still angry. He was angry with the dog, angry with himself, but most of all he was angry with his dominating little playmate.

However, his anger with Mary was never more than the little burst of a summer storm. And, as he watched the girl handle and control the white-faced savage, Benjie, admiration swept away his hot chagrin. He had no realization of it, of course, but Mary had convinced him as she never failed to do. She, a little girl who looked so fragile, could control these great beasts that were more than half wolf. They obeyed her lightest word and cringed under her ineffectual chastisement. Andy scarcely dared approach them. But for the fact that she was Mary, it must have been an outrage to his boyhood of twelve years.

Andy's mischief, however, returned at once. He came to Mary's side and possessed himself of part of her stone seat. Benjie cocked a furtive eye, and, with a watch on the dog, Andy grinned.

"They'd oughtn't to call you 'Mary,' " he said, slily. "You aren't a girl, anyway! You're just a 'terror.' You're tough an' bad like Dutch, an' Anton, an'—Oolinak!"

Mary looked up from her dog and nodded in bland agreement.

"I am," she said proudly. Then her big eyes began to shine with an enthusiasm that would not be denied. "I'm awful 'tough.' When I'm grown I'll blaze trails—everywhere," she breathed exultantly. "Summer I'll be on the river. But winter I'll beat it through blizzards that'ud freeze your red head to an icicle. My dogs'll go everywhere. Right into the pack ice. I'll—I'll go to the North Pole!" she finished up, her eyes shining.

"An' then you'll wake up," Andy chuckled.

" 'Course I'll wake up. You have to keep awake in a blizzard or you'd freeze. And I'll carry food and physic for Uncle Dan, so he won't have to get all froze up every winter. And I'll make trade with the Neches and Eskimos.

And I'll have Benjie on the lead 'cos he'll face up to anything. And ——"

"I'll show you better than carrying physic for sick Neches," Andy broke in, caught in the sweep of the other's enthusiasm. "Listen! I'll tell you what! When we're both grown, we'll get married. An' then you can make trail with me, and I'll make a rich strike like my Pop. You see, we'll have to get married or folks won't let you make trail with me. I won't mind marrying you if you got plenty dogs. 'Cos I'm going miles an' miles. Ever so far."

"How far?"

"Where my Pop goes, silly!" Andy was feeling better. He felt he was putting Mary in her place and became expansive. "And I'll make lots of dollars—like him. I'll make millions an' millions—like him."

"Will I make lots of dollars, too?"

Mary's interest in Benjie, who was still sprawled with his great forepaws on her lap, was submerged in the scheme Andy was propounding.

"Sure. You see, I'll have to pay for your teams. Everybody has to pay for their teams. I'll make a sled full of dollars."

"How much'll I make?"

"Oh, good money."

"But how much?" demanded Mary insistently.

"Fi' dollars a trip. That's ten both ways. That's a big lot for a girl," Andy conceded, largely.

"Is it? And will I have a gun and a nautomatic?"

"Sure! We both will. An' I'll shoot up caribou for food. An' walrus, an' wolves, an' musk-ox, an' polar bear. They're awful savage. You got to shoot 'em up."

"Yes. An' I'll kill 'em, too. We'll shoot up everything. Geese an' swans, an' Jean, if he comes around."

"You can't shoot Jean. That's murder. They hang you for murder."

" 'Tisn't murder," Mary denied. "Jean's a fish. He's got eyes like a fish, anyway, and I hate fish, 'cep' to eat. I got to shoot Jean up, or I won't marry you and I won't go. And ——"

"Ho! Kids!"

It was the hail of a voice that was something between that of a man and a boy. It came from out on the water in midstream where a youth was kneeling in a bark canoe paddling with the skill of an Indian.

"Bother!"

Mary's vexation was deeper than her childish expletive suggested. It was in her tone, and the angry light that leaped to her eyes as she gazed across the water at the slim figure of Jean Duchette in his new canoe. Andy gurgled a chuckle of impish mischief.

"A fish, is he? We'll see!" he cried, and sprang up from his seat.

In a moment he was running over the rough shingle with his bare heels flying. The next moment Mary beheld him plunge into the river, clothes and all. He swam out towards the on-coming canoe. His young arms churned the water till a miniature fall of it poured over his fiery head. His speed was terrific. It was like the rush of a mechanically propelled boat. And, as she watched, the solemn smile in Mary's eyes deepened with anticipation.

Jane Hesther had desisted from her dipping. The dipper was waving, and a rush of angry words poured from her thick lips in what she fondly believed to be the white man's tongue. Trudie, too, had seized the opportunity of quitting work. Both were hurling threats and warnings at the swimming boy. Mary chortled with delight.

Jean Duchette had ceased paddling and waited defensively with his dripping paddle poised. But Andy had his measure. A few yards from the birch-bark craft he dived. Then Mary saw a pair of hands reach up behind the kneeling Jean. They grabbed the side of the canoe, and, in a moment, it was over and Jean was floundering in the water towards his assailant.

For a few moments a fierce conflict raged with much shouting and spluttering and choking laughter from somewhere under the flaming head that kept bobbing up and down. Then Mary saw Jean go under. He came up choking, only to go down again and again under the merciless hands of her red-headed playmate.

Then Andy broke away, seized the floating paddle and

swam for the shore, leaving the discomfited Jean to rescue his overturned canoe.

Throughout the struggle Mary's glee had been well nigh frantic. She loved it. She gloried in it. She just sat there piping yells of encouragement at Andy while her dogs snarled their anger at a struggle in which they had no part. When the breakaway came, Mary stood up in her excitement, waiting for the next encounter when the boys should meet on dry land. At that moment Andy was the greatest thing in her world.

Andy made the shore first, and, with the paddle as a weapon of defense, stood ready and eager. The overturned boat delayed Jean. But when he stepped out of the water hauling the boat after him, there was a cold, malevolent glance in Andy's direction. He turned his boat right side up. After that he advanced threateningly on his waiting enemy.

Jean Duchette was bigger and older than the other. He was only thirteen, but his build had the promise of a big man, like his trader father, Simon. The cold malignancy of his round, pale, fish-like eyes was illuminating. And it pointed the nimble-mindedness of Andy in possessing himself of the canoe paddle.

"I'll lick the life out of you for that, you red-headed swine," Jean snarled, as he slouched toward his intended victim.

Andy's impish grin was fixed and he stood his ground.

"Mary reckons you're a fish," he jeered. "An' I guess you are, too. A rotten old fish. An' if you think you can lick me, come right along!"

The paddle was poised threateningly. But Andy's intended homicide was not to mature. There was a scurry of bare, running feet, and a rush of heavy breathing behind the advancing Jean, and in a moment a heavy hand fell clouting in no uncertain fashion. It was an enraged Jane Hesther, with all the strength of her short but massive arm behind her open-handed blows.

Jean's wet head caught them one after the other. They flung him this way and that, while the woman's busy tongue illuminated her blows.

"You'm beat it, you bum fish boy," she cried, in her queer, guttural manipulation of words. "You tak'm kyak, an' make the point quick. You lick boy, Andy? I tell you. I show. Run! Run lak hell—quick!"

The woman's furious assault left the boy no alternative. He ran to avoid her blows, but not in the direction she had indicated. He dodged away and ran toward Mary, whose dogs were on their toes expressing their mistress's dislike in their threatening snarls and bristling manes.

He drew up sharply, in obvious fear.

"Those dogs need shootin'," he cried. "I'll kill 'em all one time! I ——"

Mary's eyes were coldly scorning.

"They eat fish," she observed, simply.

"Fish? Hell! I ain't no fish. I'll sure shoot 'em for that!"

Then Jean started, and a little yell broke from him. It was Jane Hesther again. One hand seized him by his damp hair, and the other gripped the back of his neck. Big as the boy was, he was a babe in the stout woman's muscular hands. She thrust him down the bank toward the water barrel.

"You mak 'em dip water" she cried. "I fix you dis one. Sure! Andy, boy, too. Him all lak same bad red-head. Him all dip water lak hell, too. Mak 'em bar'l plenty full. So!"

Mary returned to her rock. And she sat there laughing and jeering, hugging her satisfied dogs with glee, while Jane Hesther, supported by Trudie, set the two boys to work with the dippers.

But Mary was quite impartial this time. The boys dipped furiously, and Mary realized their chagrin and spared neither. Nor did she desist from her jibing till the barrel was overflowing. Then she smilingly watched the sturdy Jane Hesther herd Jean into his boat.

As soon as Jean was safely out in midstream, the Eskimo waddled up to Mary and her dogs. Her face was wreathed in good-natured smiles once more. Her fat hands gesticulated, and her ample body shook with hardly suppressed merriment.

"It all so plenty good," she cried. "Plenty mans mak all full dis bar'l. Oh, yes! Bad red-head Andy. Bad fish boy,

too. Now you mush plenty dog, honey. Us mak haul 'em by Mission. All us mans haul 'em, too!"

CHAPTER II

THE KINGDOM OF SIMON DUCHETTE

Simon Duchette was a big, loose-limbed creature whose muscular development possessed something of the quality of drawn steel. Physically, his manhood seemed without flaw. But the rest of him was less easy of appraisement.

He was in the wide, low doorway of the principal building of the old Fort, which he had made his trading post and abode for upwards of twenty years. Leaning against one side of the doorway, his head, with its lank, blond hair escaping from under a well-worn, visored cloth cap, only just cleared the top of it.

The face turned on the sunlit waters of Lake Whitewater was coldly repellent. Its gaze was thoughtfully searching the misty heat-haze in the far eastern distance, where the steely sky came down to meet the waters. It was a face without a vestige of human kindliness in its expression. Its immobility was mask-like. But that wherein it chiefly offended was the stare of a pair of unblinking eyes. They were of the palest of pale blue. They were widely round. And they shone glassily out of a complete encirclement of the purest white. Somehow, they suggested the eyes of a dead fish.

Simon gave the impression of being completely absorbed. Behind him, in the store, the drone of bargaining voices went on. There were the monosyllabic gruntings of Indians, which say so little and express so much. Then there was the high-pitched, nasal nagging of his wife, Lola. In spite of all appearances to the contrary, however, the man was listening intently.

He was playing a part. It was his rôle in a little play which he and his wife usually acted when engaged in the more important transactions of their native trade. A party of six Yellow Knife Indians had brought in their winter catch. It consisted of six bundles of perfect silver fox pelts,

whose aggregate was some sixty skins. And the silver fox was Simon's most precious trade.

The bargaining prolonged and Simon grew impatient. He withdrew his gaze from the distance and surveyed the shelving, stony foreshore of the lake. He glanced over the score or more boats fringing the water's edge. They were of every description, kyaks, canoes, oomiaks. He turned to the crowd of natives camped upon the higher ground. There were many tepees there with their high, projecting poles. There were old men and women in dingy blankets and fur-trimmed buckskin parkas. There were younger folk in more vivid garments. There were papooses, and trail dogs. There were camp-fires smouldering in the still air. Then there was a party of buxom young Eskimo women sporting at "blanket-jumping." And the cold stare of the trader remained upon them.

Presently Simon removed his hands from the waist of his hard cord breeches, and took from the breast pocket of his close-fitting, gray flannel shirt a well-bitten plug of chewing tobacco. He hawked and spat, then he bit into the tobacco. And as he did so, there came the shuffle of moccasined feet over the earth floor behind him. Lola's stout arms held up a perfect silver fox fur for his consideration.

She was a round and not uncomely creature—a French Canadian, like her man, and of about the same years. As she approached, the upward glance of her jet-black eyes was calculated in the humility of its appeal.

Simon put his tobacco away as though nothing else mattered. Nor did he deign a glance at the dense beauty of the exquisite fur.

"Wal?" he snapped, with an air. And his cold gaze was upon the Indians crowding behind the woman.

Lola shook her head as though the position were approaching tragedy.

"We got it all fixed but the guns and liquor," she said, heavily. "I'm handing them the 'truck' they need. There's sixty of these, an' they're real good skins. I'll say that. The Yellow Knives are good hunters, and hand us nothing but the best. But they want six guns and six gallons of liquor.

And we just can't do it on the trade. We'll make a loss. No. Four guns and two gallons. That's the square limit."

She spoke in the Yellow Knife tongue, letting every word sink in with her dusky audience. Her manner was of the deepest regret. But it was all farce.

Simon took his cue with a promptness worthy of a less crafty purpose.

"The Yellow Knife's our good friend," he said, with cool dispassion, intended to reprove Lola's lack of generosity. "He's a swell hunter. The greatest of all Indians. He hands us only the best. You know that. I know it. So does he. He don't ever try to rob us, or pass us junk. An' I guess we aren't out to rob him. You'll pay those six guns. The best we got. Hand 'em plenty ammunition, too. And the six gallons of liquor. Then you can hand 'em a bunch of cotton stuff for their squaws, a—present. I'll stand for any loss so they're satisfied, and guess we treat 'em right. I——"

"But it's too——!"

Simon gestured superbly.

"Cut that right out," he said, with a snap of his strong jaws. "You'll do as I said. I'm not out to rob. Only to pay good."

The effect was instant and all Simon desired. Each fatuous child of the northern wilderness came to him and shook him solemnly by the hand. Then, with less dignity and much greedy haste, they shuffled after Lola to collect the spoils which the foolish white man, in his innocent generosity, had told her to pay. And the while Simon continued to lounge, inwardly chuckling, but outwardly an object of dignified beneficence. He knew to the last cent the princely profit his deal would yield him.

The low astuteness of it was the man. Simon had studied these simple souls for all the twenty-odd years he had been at Lake Whitewater. And he knew them to the bone.

He had never been concerned that he should be beloved, as was Father Dany Le Mar, of the Mission up the river, who, for ten years now, had forced the trader to yield something of his sovereignty over the Indians. Nor was he the type to tolerate the ridicule of these people, such as they bestowed upon the red-headed mining engineer, Larry For-

syth, whom they considered must be surely crazy, since he spent his whole time looking for something nobody could possibly desire to eat.

No. He wanted their trade. And he knew, that, to be sure of always getting it, he must stand with them a figure of awe or even downright fear. He must be in their lives a power for good or hurt. A man who, by a simple gesture, could benefit or despoil. To him the Indians were no better than cattle, and he was their herd. In twenty-odd years he had made himself little less than almighty in their lives.

Simon Duchette was without scruple. No touch of humanity had ever been known to soften him. Self was the very essence of the man. Nevertheless, the northern wilderness and its people owed him a debt, if only for his vital energy, his resource, and his undoubted courage.

These qualities had done much for the kingdom he claimed for his own. Had they not salved the old Fort, standing perched on its out-reaching promontory, gazing over a lake that was a veritable inland sea? Had they not transformed this derelict of the old days of the freetraders into a prosperous enough enterprise? Had they not made of it a real haven for the nomadic pelt hunters snatching a miserable existence on the fringe of the Arctic? Had they not made possible the humane purpose of Father Dany Le Mar's Mission, which was designed for spiritual and bodily healing? Then too, had they not all unwittingly provided a headquarters for the mining engineer, Larry Forsyth, and his little family?

Yes, these things were undoubtedly so. But it is reasonably certain that Simon Duchette's only desire in it all was for the benefit accruing to himself. No one could look into the man's expressionless face, and his cold, staring eyes without realizing his complete indifference to the better things of life.

Simon dismissed the Indians from his mind as he turned again to his far-gazing. He had something of deeper significance to concern him now the deal was completed; something which made his thought neither pleasant nor easy; something which, in a man of lesser capacity, would have meant downright anxiety.

He was no longer gazing at that hazy eastern horizon which suggested an ocean of water beyond. He had turned northward, where a thin, dark line marked the low, tundra bank where Flood River streamed out of the lake on its three-hundred-mile journey to the rockbound gulf of Big Waters, beyond which lay the Arctic seas.

Somewhere out there a man was working, patiently, secretly. He had been working at the far mouth of Flood River ever since the ice went out at the beginning of spring. He had been working there for three whole summers in succession, and Simon was still left wondering, and guessing, and seething with impotent resentment.

Larry Forsyth had arrived at Fort George some four years earlier. He had come with his young, good-looking wife, and small, fiery-headed son, Andy, with the frankly avowed intention of seeking mineral deposits—coal, oil, copper, or even gold and silver. He made no secret of his purpose. There seemed no particular reason why he should do so. He was a mining engineer, but no specialist—just a free-lance scientific investigator seeking prospects for a rich mining corporation, whose method was payment by results.

Simon had deeply considered the man's invasion of his kingdom and found it all to the good. Why not? The trader at Fort George was far too shrewd not to realize the benefit to himself of the presence of a competent mining engineer in a territory screaming for mineral exploration. If Larry Forsyth should make any discovery of real value Simon had not the smallest intention of remaining just a disinterested onlooker. Of course not. So he had surrounded himself with a veneer of cordiality that was quite foreign to him in his attitude toward any white invader of his kingdom, and almost smiled on the man.

Simon had expressed his goodwill in practical fashion. He went out of his way to make things extremely pleasant for the invader and his belongings. He advised on the site for the new home that must be built, and even set Indians to work hewing the logs necessary from the belt of spruce and jackpine that sort of backboned the neck of land on which the old Fort stood. He saw to it, too, that this buoyant, pleasant, youthful couple lacked nothing his store could

provide—at a price. And while he watched the little family settle in, his cold mind was calmly appraising the "come-back" that should ultimately be his at such time as the man's labors might bear fruit.

At that time Simon Duchette's avaricious soul had enjoyed some pleasant anticipation. The visualization of a share in a virgin oil field, for instance, that might well mean incalculable wealth to the man on the spot, had stirred even his steady pulses. The thought of a region of placer gold had been the luxury of his more extravagant moments. Nor did the more modest consideration of a seam or two of coal come amiss. All sorts of wealthy visions came within his purview. But that was all four years ago.

Larry Forsyth had proved a man of vigor and swift action. He had lost not a moment in getting to work. And Simon approved. Again there was no secret in the man's plans. He was just as open as the day. As soon as his wife and child had been securely housed, he began a systematic prospect of the many rivers radiating from the lake and gleaned every scrap of information of a useful nature with which the Indians and Eskimos could provide him. So his first summer was passed.

It was not until his second summer on the lake that Forsyth's journeyings brought him into contact with the northward-flowing Flood River. It was then he discovered, first the fearsome Whispering Lake, shunned by all Eskimos and Indians for the evil spirits reputed to haunt it, and ultimately the great gulf known as Big Waters. He had set out to explore Flood River the moment the winter ice went out. But he did not return to his home till the last of the flies and mosquitoes had been massacred by the onset of the following winter.

It was at the moment of Larry Forsyth's return from Big Waters that Simon Duchette had brought home to him the illusory nature of human dreaming.

The trader had looked eagerly for that return. He had expected to hear a frank recital of the man's adventures. He had anticipated a story of prospects and indications. He had even felt that Whispering Lake, through which Flood River flowed, might possess features of interest for a man

of scientific understanding. But nothing of the kind happened. He heard no story of any sort. Larry Forsyth returned to the Fort with his mouth shut as tight as the proverbial oyster.

The man who returned from Big Waters was no longer the open, laughing person who had set out in the spring. In his place was a gravely silent creature who deliberately avoided the trader and his store. Simon beheld a grim face and watchful eyes where he had looked for a smiling greeting. And he was disturbed.

But he was more than disturbed when winter swept down upon the world and buried it feet deep under snow. For it was then that Forsyth, with a scratch team of malemutes he had bought from the Indians, and a stout sled he had built for himself, turned his face to the southwest and set out to mush the winter trail to Leaping Horse.

Leaping Horse! It was the new great gold city of the north, and it lay to the west of the Mackenzie River Valley nearly four hundred miles distant. Only a crazy man, or a man urged by desperate need, would dare the winter trail with such an outfit. And Simon knew well enough that there was nothing crazy about Larry Forsyth.

Simon planned and acted forthwith. And the next phase in the position was swift to develop. Before Forsyth returned home, three hard-bitten white men appeared at the Fort in the trader's employ. They came at Simon's bidding from one of the gold centers of the north. And, to judge by the type of them, their going was not likely to have left any heart-break behind them.

One of them was a Swede. Dutch Deazel was obviously a gunman of the worst type. Another answered to the name of Anton Le Bane, and was clearly a product of mixed races. The third was of American-Irish extraction, and was known as Dan Quinlan. The three together made a team that was more than suitable for the work demanded of it.

Simon's swiftly conceived plans were put into prompt execution. Espionage. His gunmen were set to their tasks with orders to prosecute them to a limit only short of homicide. If Big Waters or Whispering Lake had yielded a valuable secret to this man of scientific knowledge, he,

Simon, meant to know it, and—to share in it. It was for them to pursue Larry Forsyth whithersoever he went, and to learn the secret which had sent him hurtling over the winter trail to Leaping Horse.

For three summers now the tailing of Larry Forsyth had gone on uninterruptedly. In his home. On Flood River. Camped at Big Waters, or on the shores of Whispering Lake. On the winter trail to Leaping Horse—which had become a sort of annual fixture in his life—and in that city itself. Wherever he went he was watched by men who dogged him like hounds on a hot scent, and who were at no pains to disguise the fact.

And he was fully alive to all that was going on. He made no protest. He made no attempt to elude his pursuers. He appeared quite undisturbed by their most outrageous acts. And always he met them with genial derision and smilingly went on with his work.

But Simon did no smiling. He saw nothing in that three-year pursuit to excite his humor. On the contrary, he knew that for all his lavish expenditure he had made complete failure.

All he had learned was that Big Waters had provided this man with a fortune—in lumps. And those lumps were safely deposited each winter in one of the banks at Leaping Horse. But the nature of the strike, how it was worked, and the manner of the transport of the man's treasure to Leaping Horse to be translated into cash, were things which, in spite of all his greatest efforts, remained to him an insoluble enigma.

It was neither oil, coal, nor copper. Of that Simon was quite sure. Nor was it gold or silver, in spite of certain earth workings at Big Waters in which Forsyth had indulged. These things he knew beyond any peradventure, for the simple reason that the man's outfit, which was his only means of transport, had been searched over and over again on its journey to Leaping Horse. It had never been found to contain anything of greater value than the driftwood fuel, which, to the man who mushes the barren winter trail, is even more precious than his food.

No, there was never a sign of the man's treasure. Not once

in those three years had Larry Forsyth carried in his outfit any apparent cargo of precious mineral. And yet, at the gold city, he annually traded an invisible booty for sums of money that were almost fabulous.

What was it? What did it all mean? How was this man getting away with it, and hoodwinking all pursuit? Simon was under no illusion now. The man had made a "strike." A strike of perhaps fabulous richness. Was it something small? Something to be carried on his person? It must be. Precious stones? Rubies? Diamonds, even? It looked that way. And yet——

To a man of Simon's intense greed the whole position was simply maddening. His kingdom had not only been invaded, it was being looted of that which he considered to be his right. It was being stripped of wealth in which he was not permitted to share, and the identity of which was being kept hidden from him. He had no intention of submitting to such treatment.

Now, as he searched the steely blue of the northern distance, he was resolved to hold his hand no longer. In his queer mentality he regarded all he had done in the past three years as fair dealing. But it was not for nothing he had been careful to hire gunmen. Now he would find their natural work for them. The mining engineer was no better than a "hold-up." He was holding him, Simon, up. Very well, he should be treated as such. There would be no more gloves in the fight. There was the man's person to be searched. And, alive or dead, he should be made to give up his secret.

Simon spat out his chew, which had been ground under his strong teeth to a limp, tasteless pulp. And, as he did so, the shuffle of feet behind him told of the Indians' departure with the price of their trade. He moved from the doorway to let them go.

Each of the Indians was loaded with his loot, but he paused to salute Simon as he might have saluted one of his gods. Simon accepted the salutation with appropriate gravity. Then he stood staring after them as they moved on down the shore to where their kyaks were carefully beached.

But his interest in them passed almost at once. A stoutly

built canoe shot into view around the southern bend of the shore. And it was manned by a single white man.

"Wal?"

Simon was standing at the water's edge, where a stout log landing was securely moored with heavy chains. A man with a straight-backed head was standing on the gently swaying logs, and the rawhide painter of his canoe was still in his hand. Dutch Deazel was without the national fairness of his northern race, and his black, deep-set eyes were snapping in a crafty grin which was turned in the direction of the nearby Yellow Knives.

"We best get along up inside," he said, and sucked his teeth unpleasantly. "Guess we ain't yearnin' to tell the world."

"No."

Simon glanced at the Yellow Knives and turned back toward the store.

Dutch remained long enough to make his canoe fast. Then he hauled his outfit ashore, shouldered it, and set out in the trader's wake.

Lola Duchette had seen Dutch as he passed through the store, but she did not concern herself with him. She was well enough aware of his work, and was sufficiently interested. But he was Simon's concern while the beautiful pelts she was stroking were hers.

Dutch had dumped his outfit before making his way into the big room behind the store, which was both parlor and eating-room for the trader and his family. It furthermore served as a counting-house, and was equipped, amongst its heterogeneous furnishings, with a roll-topped desk.

Simon was sitting at this desk, so that Dutch's only sight of him from beyond it was of a cold, hard face with a pair of lifeless eyes that seemed to read him through and through. Dutch hated those eyes as cordially as did everybody who was forced to remain under their unholy stare.

"I want it all quick an' short."

Simon sat back in his chair and his long legs protruded beyond the desk.

Dutch glanced down at the feet with a feeling of relief.

"It'll need to be short," he said, with a harsh laugh. "Ther' ain't a thing that's new—hardly."

"Hardly?"

"Yep. I run the boy he trades with to earth."

"You located the trade?"

There was something like momentary life in Simon's eyes. But it died instantly, as the straight-backed head shook slowly from side to side.

"Not a sign. Not a bloody sign."

"Who?"

Dutch bit a chew from a large plug, and held the black slab out to the man at the desk. Simon shook his head and sought his own.

"Pienart. Jan Pienart. Importer. Dry goods, hardware. An' mining truck. Whatever the play, it's all with Pienart. And Pienart's the best imitation of a clam I know, unless it's the guy from Big Waters. Say, that boy collected a draft on Pienart for eighty thousand dollars. He cashed it at the Monteau Bank for bills of one hundred dollars. Then he dumped the lot to his own credit with Holesons. That was his pay for the bunch he collected up there last summertime, and it looks to me short on the year before. Say, ther's a big talk 'bout that red-head guy down there. An' folks are beginning to look this way—where he comes from. They're a bright bunch at Leapin' Horse from all I can collect. An' chances are the sort of thing their mothers weaned 'em on. They're figgerin' chances around this guy, Forsyth, now. Maybe ther'll come a stampede."

"You been opening your face?"

"Not enough to blow a lucifer."

Dutch shook his cropped head, and his eyes glinted with heat. This man paid him, but that was the limit of his right.

"No," he denied with cold unfriendliness. "But you can't buy up bank tellers, and figger others can't do the same. You can't oil the works of a store clerk and guess he's dumb. Then us boys, one way an' another, has been chasin' Leapin' Horse for three winters an' some of the summers. And when Leapin' Horse gets to know a face it mostly wonders what's behind it ——"

"That's what I'm figgerin' right now."

Simon's cold interjection had a bite in it, and Dutch's dark face reddened.

"You want it quick and short," he rapped out, sharply. "Well, here it is. I was waitin' on him when he got in to Leapin' Horse, six weeks after winter shut down. He pulled in to the Beacon Light Hotel, where he always stops, and I was there before him. One of the boys passed him the right juice the moment he put his face inside the liquor department. He slept a whole day and a night. In that time I went through his outfit and drew a clean blank of anything but the stuff a trail musher hauls along with him. I searched him to the seams of his pants, and got no better than a bunch of small dollars, and the sort of junk that his redhead kid here might stuff his pockets with. Then when he woke up he mushed down to Jan Pienart's store with nothing a crazy man would pay dollars for, an' came away with Pienart's draft for eighty thousand dollars. Can you beat it? Why? I ask you. He quit Pienart with eighty thousand dollars that he cashed at the bank right away. An' he didn't quit till he'd paid the whole bunch to his credit at Holesons. That's it, short an' quick, as you said. An' all ther' is new to what we've known this three years is Pienart's the boy that passes him his dough. Well?"

Simon withdrew his feet from under his desk and stood up. The sunlight beyond the window attracted him, and he stared at it. Not a muscle of his cold features betrayed his feelings.

"Pienart—Jan Pienart?" he said.

"Sure. A Dutchman, I guess. Maybe he's Hebrew. He's a big noise in gold dumps, too. But it ain't gold. There wasn't a color to his outfit, nor anything else. I tell you I'm crazy to get wise. So are the sharps at Leapin' Horse," he added, significantly. "What's next?"

Simon turned from the sunlight and his round, dead eyes fastened themselves on the Swede's face.

"You'll stand by to beat it up to Big Waters when Anton gets in. Dan figgers he's left Anton on a good lead. When we got Anton's word you'll have to replace him. And you'll get this. There's no more eighty thousand dollars of trade

leaving this territory. Get me? He's pulled the last play on me that way. That boy don't make another trip down to Leaping Horse next winter."

"You mean ——?"

"I mean you're hired to do just as I've told you. Do it."

The men were facing each other. Simon remained unmoving, but Dutch's hand was fingering the gun holster at his hip. At that moment the door of the room was thrust open abruptly, and the loutish figure of the trader's son stood in the opening.

"Anton's pulled in, an' he's crazy to get you right away," he announced to his father, and waited.

Simon inclined his head without even a glance in the boy's direction.

"I'll be along," he said, and waited till the door closed behind the boy.

"You'll beat it right off for Big Waters when I've seen Anton," he went on to the Swede, as though nothing had interrupted him. "And when you're through, your wage is waiting right here."

Dutch laughed harshly and held out an unclean hand. Simon shook his head coldly.

"I don't do business that way," he said, and moved across to the door.

CHAPTER III

BIG WATERS

It was a keen, gray day. The sky was thinly overcast, and the sun obscured—that torrid, brazen sun which seemed to gain so great an intensity of heat in the rarer atmosphere of the polar world.

Out on the northern horizon, reaching as far as the eye could see to the east and west, stretched the gray, gleaming line which marked the southern fringe of the field of pack ice which covers so many thousands of miles of the Arctic seas. Its summer disintegration was in full activity. Air temperature was almost sub-tropical. And with it had risen the

temperature of the waters. There was no cold night of reaction to check the rush of thaw.

Already, the open sea, which was Big Waters, was a-litter with frigid bergs and starkly gleaming ice-floes. They were sailing ponderously down an irresistible current-drift, impelled, additionally, by the breath of a wind that was steadily increasing in force.

Big Waters was no mere given name, a haphazard designation to indicate a geographical point. It was a real interpretation of natural conditions that was consummately apt. It not only described the immensity of a land-locked gulf, but told of furiously speeding currents sweeping through the almost fathomless deeps of a storming sea. And it told, also, of the never-ceasing onslaught on the gray-green ramparts encompassing them.

Since the world began it is doubtful if Big Waters had ever known real calm. For, in the splendor of the twilit night of Arctic winter, or in the super-heat of the endless summer day, it was always the same. From year's end to year's end the ages-old conflict of elements had gone on with unabated fury. It was the "rough and tough" which knows no governing laws. It was the wanton elemental desire for complete destruction.

With each successive season the battle changed its aspect, but without any lessening of its fury. In winter the one hundred fifty miles of open sea transformed itself into an ice field that was mountainously piled. It sat within embracing granite arms, a pellucid world of crystal spires and fantastic minarets, lit by the cold effulgence of a sublime aurora. It dwarfed the mighty earthworks containing it and stemming its southern encroachment. And for months of bitter night it became the wild playground of a blinding fog of snow, lashed to swirling chaos by the gales which howled down off the northern wastes.

The thaw of the open season brought no cessation from the elemental conflict. For it was then that the waters took a hand. With the first rise in temperature, the angry, headlong currents, breaking from under their long winter prisoning, set about recovering a domination all too long denied

them. The ice was wrecked, smashed, driven. It was swept away amid groans and thunderings of bitter protest.

Then the culminating moment of the blistering heat of summer, surely enough to melt the frigid heart of even that barren, shadeless world; surely a season calculated to lull the elements into quiescence, and create a peaceful gladness in life.

But no, there could be no peace on Big Waters. That was the moment for the reckless sea currents to prosecute their own private feuds. From the beginning to the end of summer Big Waters was churned into a veritable maelstrom of raging seas, upon which no native-built craft had ever been known to dare.

At the deepest indentation of the granite arc confining Big Waters lay the mouth of Flood River. In fleeting moments of windlessness it was almost hidden in Arctic mists, which arose from the conflicting temperatures of meeting waters. When the winds were blowing it stood out sharp and clear, a mile-wide opening between twin headlands that dwarfed the cliff line adjoining them.

Inside the opening lay a land-locked cove which the seething outside currents were forever striving to invade. They failed. They had always failed. And they would continue to fail for just so long as the headlands nursed between them a great bank of the silt of ages, and themselves resisted the erosion of the raging surf that boomed and crashed about them.

Thus, in the shelter of these great hills, in the very heart of Nature's chaos, there had been provided a shelter, a perfect sanctuary for millions of Arctic wild-fowl, and a peaceful breeding-ground for those hard-pressed denizens of the northern seas seeking respite from the terrors of elemental strife.

High up on the southern face of the western of the two headlands, at a point affording a wide view of the broad expanse of the inner waters, a man was perilously perched on an inclined ledge of rock that was no more than two feet in width. From below he appeared to be without any support. He was just there, dizzily poised, with a sheer drop beneath him of over three hundred feet.

For a long time Larry Forsyth had remained without movement. He was just sitting, with a pair of field-glasses held to his keen blue eyes, observing a moving figure at a distant point on the foreshore so far below him.

The man's deeply freckled face was almost completely hidden by the hands that held his glasses. They were big, discolored, strong hands, typical of the bare forearms supporting them. His body was lean and muscular, too, as were the cord-breeched legs that dangled over the lip of rock on which he was sitting. A trailman's cloth cap completely hid his vivid shock of red hair, and there was nothing about the nondescript hue of his outer garments to render him in the slightest degree conspicuous against the queer-hued rock which formed his background.

His preoccupation was profound. It was so deep that the swirl of screaming sea-fowl about him was only heeded when it chanced to sweep across his line of vision. Nor was the wind, which smote stingingly as it played around the headland, a thing to trouble him, even though his only upper garment was a thin, open-throated shirt. Then, too, he remained quite unaware of the roar of crashing breakers that came up to him. It was a thunder which was an everyday sound in his life.

He was watching, watching, and considering with a mind torn between confidence and hot human resentment.

Something of the latter had become apparent in his attitude, in just what way it would have been difficult to point. Nevertheless, his poise, his intent watchfulness, perched there on his dizzy eyrie, contrived to give the impression of a creature of prey, waiting, measuring, anticipating a predatory downward swoop upon some unwitting victim below.

The man below was deliberate in his movements. They were quite unhurried and almost casual. For the moment he was standing beside a camp-fire—Larry Forsyth's own camp-fire—whose spiral of smoke was slanting away under the breeze. He was observing a roughly constructed winch set up over the mouth of a shaft sunk in the higher ground of the foreshore, within a few yards of overshadowing cliff.

And something of the considerable depth of the working was indicated by the great pile of tailings that stood nearby.

Presently the eyes behind the glasses saw the man step up to the winch, and peer into the mouth of the shaft. Then they saw him reach out and test the rope hanging from the winch. After that they saw him pass around to the crude wooden handle and swing it over.

A moment later Larry Forsyth forgot his resentment, and his eyes lit with a smile. The figure below had suddenly turned away, and was moving up to the entrance of a cave at the base of the cliff. He understood. He waited. And his smile broadened into a grin of sheer derision.

Larry watched the man peer into the cave. And the prolongation of that peering became still more amusing. But at last the fellow straightened up and flung a searching glance about him. A moment later he had passed within the cavern.

Larry's glasses were instantly lowered. It was the expected that had happened. The spy had gone to search his camp from end to end—once more. And so the smile of derision remained on his strong, good-humored face.

After awhile, however, he turned away. And as he did so, his smile was replaced by a frown of ugly humor. It was a natural reaction. His unconcern for what his shadower might discover remained, but resentment surged through his brain. So he sat there glowering upon a scene that was grim and gray under a sky that wore no summer smile.

Immediately below, directly behind the silt bar entrance, and sheltered by the might of the twin headlands, the cove was at its greatest breadth. Ages of steady erosion had eaten far, so that the headlands were left at the extremity of two mammoth sheltering piers, and the ruffled waters were spread out some four or five miles in extent.

It was the point of the cove's greatest width, and from it it tapered away southwards for some ten or twelve miles. In the far distance its irregular, granite walls closed in to form the frowning gorge which was the deep channel of Flood River, where its swift waters streamed down off barren uplands.

Towering gray-green walls encompassed the cove in every direction. And every protruding facet of them was swarm-

ing with sea-fowl. They were there in their millions. And as many more were in the air, or on the surface of the water below. It was all a dour expression of Nature's grimness, and the swarming bird life only contrived to emphasize it. It was a place of leaden deadness, full of haunting cries and thunderous echoes.

The storming Big Waters outside might terrify. The thunder of its breakers, the churning fury of overwhelming seas, might well stagger the human mind; but they did, at least, convey the spirit of a living world. The cove that lay behind it was just a mighty, walled sepulcher whose only impression of life was the swirling, screaming sea-fowl seeking security within its sterile shelter.

The deadliness of the place left Larry Forsyth cold, and quite unmoved. But as an expression of Nature it made a strong appeal. It was "different." Sixteen years of a mining engineer's wanderings over the earth's roughest places had long since taught him that the ripest plums in his profession were mostly picked where Nature's earth formations were "different."

Larry believed that the old earth was so full of the precious things a mining engineer was seeking that he had only to look for them long enough, and with sufficient enthusiasm and knowledge, to be able to help himself ultimately to all he needed.

That was the faith of his life, which he asked no more than to be allowed to live in. All he wanted was to act up to it. He was content to face a hundred disappointments, and buck the game afresh after each in a cheerful spirit of optimism. But when it came to conflict with those whose unscruple meant robbing him of the fruits of his labors, then his whole personality revolted. He was ready to stand pat on the battleground they marked out for him.

Larry knew the man who had just disappeared into the cave which had been his camp for so long. It was Dutch Deazel; one of the three men who had been paid to shadow him for the past three years by Simon Duchette. And he knew that the man meant robbery. But it was not that which had changed his mood from laughter to resentment.

It was the personality of the man. Dutch Deazel had laid

him out with dope at Leaping Horse at the start of the last winter. And Larry passionately resented being laid out with dope by any hired thug, even though the man had gained nothing by his act. He had a big score up against this man, who had only just arrived at Big Waters in relief of the other shadower, the half-breed, Anton Le Bane, and Larry meant to have something of it paid off without any sort of delay.

Larry bestirred. Without any apparent concern for the peril of his position, he drew up his legs, knelt up, and then stood erect on his narrow shelf. He stood there without support of any sort and gazed down at his camp. He waited. And presently the Swede reappeared.

One glance was sufficient to tell Larry that the gunman had returned empty-handed. And he grinned again. He knew his secret was safe enough from these killers, and from that bowelless wolf, Simon. They might chase him till the crack of doom for all he cared. It was no use without knowledge. Knowledge? Psha! He had it. And they—had not.

Dutch moved quickly now. He passed down again to Larry's shaft. For a moment or two he eyed it with what Larry felt to be some doubt. Then, suddenly, he moved around to the handle of the winch and started paying out the rope.

Larry's interest deepened. He knew there was sixty feet of that rope, and he watched it all vanish down the shaft. All, that is, except that which was knotted securely about the winch. The man's next move interested him even more. The moment the last of the rope had been paid out, Dutch reached out, caught it with both hands, and, clinging to it, swung himself out over the shaft. Then, hand over hand, he lowered himself and disappeared from view.

"The crazy goat!"

Larry chuckled aloud. Then he turned to make that swooping descent from his eyrie.

Larry was standing beside the mouth of his shaft. He had approached it stealthily, almost without a sound. His deeply freckled face wore a grin of puckish humor. But his fine eyes were glittering with cold purpose.

He was lean, athletic, in his worn and stained clothing. He was good to look at for his keen, strong face, and the poise of his red head on a muscular column of bare neck. He looked just what he was, a battling creature of the northern wilderness ready to grab every difficulty by the neck and wring it.

His eyes were on the rope which now hung slack from the winch. He waited till he saw a slight movement in it. Then, keeping sufficiently clear of the gaping mouth of the shaft, he spoke, directing his words so that the man in the depths could hear.

"Say, Dutch," he bawled down the shaft, "it's a mighty fool play to drop down the other feller's shaft, while he's sitting around the top of it ready to cut the hauling gear if he feels that way. Jumping a guy's claim isn't any sort of pastime for a crazy man who don't know how to do it right. Aren't you getting bugs?"

He waited. But he knew well enough there would be no reply, at least no verbal reply, from the bottom of the shaft. He kept a watchful eye on the rope.

"Sure, you must be," he grinned presently, as the silence remained. "Have you found the gold you're needing? No? There's a bunch of stuff down there. But you can't see it, eh? No, I guess not. Too much seep of water. Will I pass you down a lantern? No. I'd hate to dazzle you with the stuff you'll never get.

"Now you're just going to come right up out of that quick," he went on. "Get me? No. Quit the rope," he added sharply, as he saw it take a strain. "I've a knife here that says that rope isn't any sort of use to you till I say. Now, first, you'll reckon you're something of a dirty-nosed school kid, and I'm the head who's liable to hurt you where your pants fit tightest. See? You'll take those two guns you mostly trail around with you, and you'll loose off twenty perfectly good shots. They'll worry your ears for you down there, and maybe start a shower of elegant gold falling out of the sides of the shaft around you. But you'll do it while I count, or I'll drop the rope, and leave you forty feet to climb out of a hole that wouldn't give foothold to a louse. Now start right in. And then I'll say some more."

Larry waited, his face still grinning, but his eyes watchful. And, after awhile, there came the sound of the first shot. It came without a word of announcement. And it was followed by nineteen others in rapid succession.

Larry counted them with great care. For he knew the man with whom he was dealing. After the twentieth muffled crack, and the last of the bullets had whistled skywards out of the mouth of the shaft, he again approached.

"That's all right, Dutch," he called down, and there was no longer amusement in his tone. "I guess you got more clips ready to pack into those automatics of yours, and you're likely figuring that way now. But don't. You'll waste 'em. You keep 'em for later, when you'll get a chance to use 'em. You won't get a chance now. You see, you'll need all your hands to get a holt on that old rope if you're yearning for more daylight than you've got, and less wet to your feet. If you're feeling good about it you can climb right now, like any other darn fool ape. I'm not hauling."

Larry listened to the sounds that came up from the depths in response to his jibes. And he interpreted them in the light of his understanding of the man. Then he saw the rope take a big strain.

He backed away. And the makeshift winch creaked under its climbing burden. Then, presently, when the dark head of the Swede appeared in the mouth of the shaft, and his black eyes goggled to locate the man who had turned the tables on him, it was to discover the ugly snub muzzle of Larry's gun covering him.

Dutch was undeterred at the sight. Throughout his climb up the unpleasantly swinging rope he felt that the moist bottom of that detestable shaft, in which he had foolishly permitted himself to be trapped, was a sort of yawning grave waiting to engulf his big body. He had never before realized what a joyous thing was broad daylight. He was breathing hard, but he reached up at the winch, grabbed it, and, with cat-like agility, swung himself out of the hole on to firm ground.

Larry's freckled face was without a ghost of a grin now, and his eyes glittered.

"Stick 'm both up, Dutch," he said, coldly. "Both. That's

it. Now you can drop your left hand and cast off that gun belt, and drop it on the ground. Then back up ten paces and see you don't break your darn neck down that hole you were so curious about. Move! Quick! I'm wasting no time. That's better. You're as tame as a she wild cat under—a muzzle."

"I'll get you for this, you son of a bitch!"

The furious hate behind the man's filthy epithet gave it a snarl calculated to invite reaction. But it did no more than harden the set of Larry's jaws.

"I know," he said, frigidly, as the man's guns dropped to the ground. "It's always that way with you boys who live by homicide. Now, step clear—as I said."

The Swede moved under the compulsion of the other's gun. He stepped back the exact number of paces. And, as he did so, Larry moved up and possessed himself of the weapons he had left behind.

"That's all right, Dutch," he said, quietly. "We can figure now we're even for that dope you pushed at me 'way back at Leaping Horse. Don't worry over things so you can't sleep at nights. You'll get all the chances coming to you—later. And see you make better use of 'em than you have of those I've handed you right here. Gee! If you and those others were only brighter than a bunch of plain killers! I guess for three years I've handed you folks chances all the time. I've just sat around leaving you a free play to get busy. Have you located it?"

Larry shook his head at the fury-distorted face of the man who knew what to expect when he got back to Simon Duchette with his story. Dutch broke out with a foul oath. Larry moved his gun hand in a manner that reduced the other to instant silence.

"This is my talk, Dutch," he said. "Don't butt in. You've said all you need. No. You haven't located a thing in three years. Now you've been through my camp here, you've been through my outfit down on the water, and you've been down that—hole. You're no wiser. Not a thing, Dutch! You haven't a word to take back to Simon that'll set him hollering with joy. You still don't know. And, believe me, you never will know. So I'll tell you. Right down there in that outfit

on the river, that you've searched, there's the biggest dope of stuff I've ever pulled out of Big Waters. That bunch will double my bank roll at Leaping Horse, and *you* know how much that is. I'm pulling out now. Right away. I'm through. It's not because I've got it all. Oh, no. Get this, Dutch, and let it sink in. *There's more wealth left behind me here than I could hope to take out in years!* It's here in sight. And I'm leaving it for you, or Simon, or anyone else if they can locate it. That's where the laugh's with me, boy. Oh, it's a big laugh! Locate it? What a hope! A bunch of brain that can't think better than homicide. Go to it. Get a look around. It's peeking out laughing at you all over the gorge. So long, boy. I'm keeping these guns of yours as a souvenir. I'll return them when I see you down at the Fort."

If the Swede had had any desire for retort he had no real opportunity of making it, for Larry Forsyth hurried down the foreshore to where his laden boat was lying ready for departure. He had listened to the last part of the engineer's talk, literally staggered.

He glowered after the man who had so coldly scorned him in the fact that he had told him of the wealth he was leaving behind. And suddenly he bethought him of the stupendous folly he had committed in accepting Simon's pay.

He saw Larry stand and consider his boat with its disturbed load. Then he saw him straighten out the outfit which he, Dutch, had left in the belief that it contained nothing of real value. Then he saw him take his place in the laden craft and dip his paddle.

The last view Dutch had was of a bared red head as the man removed his cloth cap and bent to the task of fighting the stream.

CHAPTER IV

A MATTER OF SWIMMING

Larry Forsyth's home had been set up a few hundred yards or so to the southwest of the more pretentious buildings of Father Dany Le Mar's Mission. It stood well above the level

of spring floods on the northern bank of Hope River where the storm-driven belt of pine woods sheltered it.

It was a three-roomed structure of lateral logs, with a log-built, inclined roof, out of which protruded iron stove-piping. It differed from other habitations of its kind only in that it was presided over by a young wife whose refinement and attraction were capable of expressing themselves even where life was remotest, and civilization was down to the bone.

But Evie Forsyth was more than that. She belonged to that wonderful type of womanhood whose whole horizon is bounded by the mate which the springtime of life had brought her, and the child whose bearing has been her holiest joy.

There was nothing else in the world for Evie Forsyth but just these two creatures with their flaming heads and their freckled faces. Larry's physical well-being and such soul peace as she could help him to, and the world-happiness and gilded future which her dreaming had designed for their only offspring made up her whole life's purpose.

Evie was dark and tall, and, though of willowy slimness, she lacked nothing in the gracious curves of her womanhood. She looked out upon any world to which her man's wanderings carried her with eyes that were softly gray, and very wise. They were set in the charming oval of a face as yet untouched by any disfiguring expression of the passing years.

She had been radiantly lovely when, years ago, she had sacrificed the luxury of a wealthy home for the endless trail of a man born with a mining engineer's wanderlust. She was no less beautiful now in her added maturity. And in all her years in the earth's rough places content and perfect happiness had softened every hardship and shown her nothing to lessen her faith, or darken her life with a single shadow of regret.

Pursuing the will-o'-the-wisp of fortune had provided Evie with no bed of roses. But, then, she had expected none, had asked for none. All she asked was to be beside her man. That which satisfied the needs of his body was good enough for hers. Together they had basked in the limited sun of their

successes. And together they had laughed away the shadows of their direst misfortunes.

The spirit of the long trail had been hers because of her man, nor would it die out of her so long as he was at her side. It was all part of the beautiful dream she had dreamed when she first discovered attraction in the fiery hue of his head, and from which she still refused to awaken. These things, and the tender burdens of her motherhood, made up the sum of her earthly heaven.

There were, however, moments when Evie more than simply wondered that so much happiness had been vouchsafed her. It was all so big. Sometimes she felt the intensity of it to be a little overwhelming, and she grew afraid. In the gentle humility of her spirit, at such times, she questioned her right to it, and she asked herself what she had ever done to so deserve. And, being honestly downright, the question never failed to produce a negative reply.

It was one of those disquieted moments with her now. She was sitting in her doorway, just sheltered from the blaze of noon sun. She was at work for her young son. It was rare, in fact, that she was not at work for him. Just now she was skillfully welding a fresh, hard, cord seat to a pair of damaged knickers.

The happy Andy and the bare-limbed Mary were there at her feet. Mary was kneeling, and the boy was squatting. Between them a sack was spread out on the ground, piled with an already wilting mass of freshly gathered Arctic flowers. The girl was sorting them with keen discrimination into color groups. Andy was smilingly looking on. And, nearby, Benjie, the trail dog, was slumberously basking with his wolfish muzzle propped against one of the girl's bare feet.

Evie paused from her work. For some moments she watched the children at their simple pastime. Then, of a sudden, she flung a quick, apprehensive glance down the sluggish channel of the river where it rounded the bend beyond which Simon Duchette's store lay hidden from view. Somehow it was always that way now. In her happiest moments there leapt a spasm of fear. So it had been since the ice went out in the spring, and Larry had gone up to his

secret work at Big Waters. The thought of Simon Duchette was always a threatening shadow.

Presently she drew a deep sigh, and mutely thanked God for the wonderful luck that had come to her man. Larry had promised her that, if all went well, the end of the summer would see the end of Lake Whitewater for them. That meant only a few more weeks of summer now, a few difficult weeks of the long winter trail to Leaping Horse. Then the ultimate—the fulfillment of those dreams she had dreamed for her man and her boy. If all went well! She bent over her work and stabbed her needle into it with unnecessary vigor.

Andy looked up. His cheerful face was a-grin with sly humor.

"Why does a girl kid always do fool things, Mumsy?" he asked, with a pretense of innocence.

"I don't think girls do nearly so many fool things as boys." Evie went on stitching. "Especially boys with absurd red heads and foolish freckles."

"Oh, yes, they do, Mumsy," Andy laughed back at her. "Look at Mary right now. She had me chasing the river cliff banks all morning for those when we could have been swimming. They ain't flowers really. Just fool weeds. They'll be all dead in a while—wilted. Mary, you're a crazy, fool kid. You ain't got sense."

"You're a silly boy," his mother reproved. Then, gently censorious: "And I won't have you say 'ain't' that way. I'm always telling you. So is Father Dan. And your dad, too, when he's here. Jean says 'ain't' all the time. But he won't learn better. You don't want to grow up like Jean?"

Mary cocked a scornful, smiling eye at her playmate. And it had the effect she intended. The freckled face flushed, and the boy's eyes lit resentfully.

"Jean's not grown up," he protested. "He's only a year more than me. And," he added vehemently, "I can lick him in a show-down anyway!"

The sight of the upward thrust of the boy's expressive chin warmed his mother's heart, though she further prepared to chide. But Mary precipitated things. Intent on her flowers

she intoned a taunt that completely upset the last vestige of the boy's equanimity.

"Brag! Silly Brag! Con-tem-chuous, silly Brag!" she chanted.

And Andy leaped.

He lunged across the spread of sacking. And, in a moment, Mary's work was wrecked, and tins and flowers were flung headlong. Mary looked at him—just one swift glance at the red-head so well within her reach. There was no weakness, no hesitation. A slap, a stinging, resounding slap, and a vivid impression of Mary's slim fingers was left amidst the freckles on the boy's cheek. Benjie growled.

The girl nodded.

"That's yours, you Andy," she said, coolly. "And you best be careful. Benjie saw ——"

"I don't care what Benjie saw," Andy broke out, hotly. "I'm not scared of Benjie, or you, or Jean, or—or anybody. I ——"

"Then just say no more about it," his mother cried, sharply, laying aside the now mended knickers. "Brave men don't tell their women-folk how brave they are," she admonished. "And there wasn't anything brave about upsetting Mary's flowers. Don't let me have any more quarreling, either of you, or I'll send Mary right back to Jane Hesther at the Mission. Now you set to, Andy, and help Mary straighten out her flowers again."

There was a moment of sulky hesitation, then Andy grabbed a handful of flowers and recklessly stuck them into one of the tins. He sat glowering at them. And Mary knelt up with pursed lips and slowly nodding head.

"Andy, boy," she said, presently, and with perfect amiability, "you fix flowers better than anybody I know! You surely do."

In a moment the boy's laugh broke through the sulky clouds, and peace and harmony were restored.

The mother smiled down at these precious children. She understood their every mood. She knew the mutual adoration existing between them. And she was never really concerned for the little ebullitions of temper that occasionally marred their constant companionship. She loved them both, the

parentless, adopted daughter of the celibate missionary almost as much as she did her own son.

Then, too, she understood how much Mary's companionship meant to Andy. She realized to the full his wild, headlong, battling but generous spirit that was endless in its potentialities. It must be controlled without in any way being submerged. She felt that with all the instinct of her motherhood. And Mary, with her queer childish purpose, she knew, was the biggest factor of control in his life. She, with impish enthusiasm, was always apparently ready to abet his reckless mischief, but never without unseen brakes firmly grasped in her slim hands.

That little exhibition of the boy's temper more than ever stirred Evie to thankfulness for the luck that had come to them through her man. She knew how necessary it was to get Andy away to the world of civilization where real education, the university, could develop him into the right manhood she desired for him. She had no regret for what the northern wilderness had done for him. It had founded in him a splendid physical development. It had lifted him beyond his years in both body and spirit. But the elemental had possessed him, too. It had bred in him the passionate wildness that he had drunk in with his baby milk. He was just a laughing, headstrong savage. Well, if all went ——

The mother's yearning was interrupted. It was the hurried approach of the half-breed, Trudie, who worked for her—an urgent creature who shuffled around the angle of the building with the pad of moccasined feet. She was firmly grasping an unattractive lump of green store bacon.

"The beans is thro'," she cried, as though announcing a calamity of dire import. "The hog meat ain't 'nuff. No eats 'nuff for two damn kid. No. All 'm hungry mush. Yes. Plenty white fish, boy, Andy, mak catch 'em las' night. Us all cook 'em. So. Bimeby us all mans eat 'em up hog meat supper. That ways mush good. All plenty eat—Lor' be praise—maybe. Ain't us?"

Andy grinned up at the worried face with its rolling eyes.

"Don't say 'ain't,' Trudie," he warned, slily. "Benjie don't like it—an' Mary."

Trudie's leer of good nature told of her regard for the boy.

"You dam-fool red-head," she assured him, and turned to her mistress.

Evie nodded.

"Yes," she agreed. "Andy's fish now, Trudie. The pork for supper."

The pad of moccasins carried Trudie out of sight again, and Andy called after her as she vanished around the building.

"You can't fix dinner yet, Trudie. Mary says she wants to go swimming."

Mary knelt up, beaming.

"You Andy!" she cried; "I never said! What a liar!"

The boy laughed.

"You *do* want to go swimming. You know you do."

"*You* do, you mean," the girl retorted. "And *I'm* not lying!"

Andy sprang to his feet with a movement of swift impatience and turned to the river.

"Nor wasn't I lying either," he denied. "I was just saying for fun, 'cos—'cos you get mad at me. 'Course I want to go swimming. I'd swim all the time like ——"

"A fish," suggested Mary, sweetly. "Or—Jean!"

Just for an instant another quarrel seemed imminent, but the watchful mother averted it very firmly. She raised a beckoning hand.

"Come here, both of you," she said, coolly. "Come along. You, Andy. Yes, I want you. I don't care if you did it for fun or not. You did lie. It's always a lie when it's not the truth. Even if it's for fun."

The youth stood taller than his mother where she sat. He came reluctantly to her side, his freckled face smiling impenitently. He grinned at Mary as she scrambled up from her place, upsetting the protesting Benjie as she did so. In a moment they were on either side of Evie, and an arm was set about each of the slim young bodies.

"I hate lies," the mother went on, gently. "You can't trust folks who lie, even in fun. So don't let me ever have that sort of thing again, Andy. If *you* want to go swimming, just say

so. Mary's a tease. I know she teases you, and it's not kind. Still, she's a good little girl and she doesn't like lies any more than ——"

"But I do like lies, Auntie Evie," Mary said. "I love 'em when they're told good," she assured, quietly, leaning her head affectionately against the woman she regarded as a sort of second mother. "And I'm not good any more than Andy. We're both bad. Ter'ble bad. Aren't we, Andy? But I'm worst. Much worst. 'Cos when I'm grown, and Andy marries me, I'm going to shoot up Jean, 'cos he's a fish, an' —an' hates Andy. I'd shoot anyone who hates Andy. That's not being a good girl, is it? But I'm going to. Andy's going to buy me a lot o' nautomatics, and teach me so I can shoot good. Won't Jean look funny when he's all shot up? All blood, an' holes, an' things," she cried, ecstatically. "He will have blood, won't he, though he's a rotten fish?" she demanded, with some concern. "It won't be fun shooting him if he hasn't. I like blood. Lots an' lots. Oh, he'll make a lovely, lovely mess all over the place. An ——"

"You're a bloodthirsty little tough," Evie laughed, hugging the slight body close to her and laughing happily. "If Father Dan heard you he'd ——"

"No, he wouldn't, Auntie Evie," came the prompt retort. "'Cos I've told him."

Mary's face beamed with confident delight. But Andy looked concerned.

"What'd you go an' tell him for, silly?" he demanded, angrily.

"'Cos I always tell him. I like telling him."

"What did he say," asked Evie. "Was he very, very angry?"

"No. 'Course not. He don't like Jean. That's why I told him as soon as Andy and me had fixed it. He just said he didn't think it good me doing the shooting. But if I really must shoot anyone he thought he'd rather it was Jean's father. Maybe he reckoned he'd make a better mess, 'cos he's bigger."

Andy broke from his mother's embracing arm excitedly.

"You can't shoot 'em both, Mary," he protested. "That's not fair. I don't mind you shooting Jean, he's only a fish.

But Simon's my meat. An', anyway, you couldn't shoot good enough to kill him. A girl couldn't. No, I best do all the shooting. It'll be surer. You can have your old malemutes an' the sled. An' they can eat 'em both up when they're dead."

"That shows what you know, you Andy," Mary scorned, her eyes sparkling under the wonderful vision they were conjuring. "Benjie don't eat dead folks. Only live."

Evie gestured and stood up laughing.

"For goodness' sake!" she cried. "I never knew you could be such wicked, wicked young savages! And, yes, I believe Mary *is* the worst. Now you both stay right here while I go get my swimming suit on. It'll be good to wash away some of your nasty ideas. We'll go right along to the cliff banks where we can get a high dive. You're just a pair of scallywags. You—you killers!"

Evie hurriedly passed back into the house, glad enough of the excuse for a swim in the intense noon heat. And the two conspirators waited for her in the doorway.

For some moments they remained silent. Andy was gazing on the shining waters of the river as they drifted with summer oiliness to their fate in the bosom of the lake beyond. But he was no more concerned for them than was the solemn-eyed Mary for the steel-blue sky upon which her wrapt gaze was turned.

It was Mary who finally voiced the common thought.

"We're—we're killers!" she whispered, in a hushed voice of awe.

Andy nodded.

"Sure," he replied, frowning, but in a tone of superior confidence. "Like Dutch. An' Anton. An' Dan Quinlan."

"Is they—killers?"

"Sure. My Dad says so."

CHAPTER V

DISASTER

The breeze had freshened into half a gale with the suddenness characteristic of Lake Whitewater. It was sweeping out

of the far horizon, and, encountering the head of water pouring from the mouth of Hope River, churned it stormily in the conflict. It came blustering under a cloudless sky and a blazing noon sun, and warned of the far-off icefields whence it hailed.

The light craft rocked violently in the shop. But the man at the paddle rejoiced in the sudden drop of temperature and was wholly unconcerned for safety. Sixty miles of hard paddling in the difficult, almost crazy currents of the lake, in blazing heat, lay behind him, and Father Dany Le Mar was thankful for the change. He drove with renewed vigor against the stream and headed his craft for the floating cluster of raw logs which was his home landing.

He was glad at the sight of the crude old buildings of his Mission, nestling against their background of sheltering woodlands. He was glad even of the sterile foreshore that was so baldly uninviting. But he was more glad still that a woefully depressing mission had been accomplished, and he was free to give all his work and thought to the living rather than to the dead.

That was the man. His whole purpose in life was help—help for those whose darkened lives were yet possible of lightening; help, even where no help could serve better than to relieve suffering.

His long trip had weighted him with heartsick depression. It had been just one more errand of mercy amongst his widely scattered flock of benighted humanity. Scurvy and dysentery in bodies already weakened by tuberculosis—ugly enough under the best medical conditions, disastrous on the fringe of the world.

It had been an urgent summons and piteous. A long, long trip to the lake's southern shore where had been made the summer camp of a lodge of fishing Indians. Out of five stricken creatures he had left three behind him dead.

The kyak nosed up to the logs under the man's skillful paddle. He leaped out and secured it. Then he removed his meager camp outfit and laid it aside. After that he lifted the boat from the water and shouldered it up to its home shelter out of the sun. Returning presently, he collected his outfit and passed on up to his Mission.

Father Dan, as he was affectionately called, although a priest of his church, was something unorthodox. His urge was for humanity rather than priestcraft. He succored the body rather than the soul. He was tall, with a lean, rather hatchet face lit by dark eyes that were deep-set and twinkling. His jet-black hair was already graying, but not as a result of his years. The only outward seeming of his calling he ever displayed was the rusty black coat he always wore. For the rest, there was little to distinguish him from any other hard-bitten northern trailman.

A hail greeted him from the inclined roof of his home. A squat and very fat figure was standing erect upon it beside a kerosene tin of liquid tar. It was grasping a bunch of reeds from which the viscous liquid dripped profusely. It was Jane Hesther.

"You'se 'm all come 'long quick," she protested, her discomposure at his too early arrival battling with her native good nature. "Us tar 'em all up 'long dis watter place mak wet all thing. No good. Not." She paused with a look of keen inquiry. "Fool Indian man all dead—maybe?"

The sight of the absurd round figure on the roof had momentarily lifted Father Dan out of his depression. But Jane Hesther's final inquiry plunged him back into it again.

"Three," he said, signing with three upheld fingers. "Where's Mary?"

"Mar-ee she eat plenty with Andy boy. Oh, yes. It mak good that way. Mar-ee not muss up all thing bad. Bimeby Mar-ee come. Bimeby us all fix him tar. So. Us cook 'em boss big eat plenty."

Jane Hesther's flow ceased. And she pondered the missionary with a glance aslant.

"Indian mans. Three. All dead," she mused.

Father Dan sighed.

"Yes. Three."

"Not 'nuff!"

The retort rapped viciously, and Jane Hesther bent again to her work of tarring while the startled man stared.

"Jane Hesther!" he reproached, sternly.

But the Eskimo remained quite impenitent.

"You'se 'm speak 'Jane Hesther' that way," she shrilled

down at him, flourishing her improvised tar brush dangerously. "Why for? Indian man sick? So. Him sick. Indian man dead? Three? Not 'nuff!"

Experience had long since taught Father Dan the uselessness of controversy when Jane Hesther's racial hatred was stirred. The loyal soul could never be induced to suffer the Christian woman in her at such times. So, with a flicker of humor twinkling in his eyes, in spite of his feelings, he somewhat precipitately sought the shadowed interior of his house.

The Mission at Whitewater was well back from the mouth of Hope River, some half a mile from the point where stood Simon's old Fort. It consisted of a cluster of small buildings whose date and origin were uncertain. The main thing about them that had originally appealed to Father Dan was that they were stout, and, though most of them had been roofless when first located, they were capable of simple repair. That, and the shelter of the woods backing them, had been the deciding factor in his selection. They formed, so to speak, a ready-made Mission.

Time and energy had transformed these derelicts. Now there were three staunch main buildings, and several lesser storehouses and dugouts. One of the three principal buildings was Father Dan's personal home, and the other two provided a Mission House, and a sort of infirmary where the man practiced such arts of physical healing as he possessed.

Counted by its Spartan lack of the common comforts of life, Father Dan's abode was a poor enough place. But, then, the man had no concern for his own comfort. If his powerful body were weary, then there was always the log-built bunk he had made for himself, and upon which he now flung his roll of blankets. If he needed to write, or pore over one of his many books, or eat the coarse mess of food which was the limit of Jane Hesther's culinary attainments, there was a rude table built of split logs, and a three-legged stool set before it. These latter were expressions of the crudest home-made utility, but they served him sufficiently. Then, if he needed heat with which to comfort his body when winter

froze the mercury, there was a shallow pit in the earth floor set with stones on which to build all the fire he needed.

There were, however, one or two trifling details which might be definitely accounted amenities. One was a cheap kerosene lamp. It was fixed to the wall over his table to afford him light in the long night of winter. Then he had contrived several cupboards, made out of the white wood of packing-chests obtained from Simon's store. But the one real touch of luxury, which also proclaimed the man, was a wall covered with improvised shelves over its whole space. Those shelves were packed with books to their capacity; a comprehensive library of amazing range, from science and history down to classical fiction.

The building had been crudely divided into three rooms. The entrance room was Father Dan's living room, small, and lit only by the open doorway. One room opening out of it was Mary's sleeping quarters, and another was given over to Jane Hesther for the purposes of those culinary operations which were her daily task. Yet, in spite of its shortcomings, it was a home in the best sense. For it served a simple creature as a base for work that was dearer to his heart than life itself.

Jane Hesther bustled down from the roof. With Father Dan home from the trail roof leaks had no longer any interest for her. He must have his food. And she forthwith produced a camp kettle of stewed meat, which was the everyday home meal that had satisfied him for years. There was some hard, ash-baked bread, too, and a kettle of strong, long-boiled tea. The man ate hungrily and with complete indifference.

After his meal, Father Dan sat himself on the stone sill of his doorway and smoked. His thoughtful gaze was on the chop of ruffled water while the rush of wind tore at the mane of his lank hair.

He was pondering on Jane Hesther's outburst of racial feeling, and the inner significance of it, and he was thinking earnestly but without censure. He had no blame for the woman, really. She was a simple victim of prejudice bred into her through the ages. The Eskimo hated the Indian. And the Indian despised the Eskimo. The Eskimo was kindly,

generous, honest, indefatigable. And the irony of it was that these splendid human qualities came out of benighted faith in witchery and superstition, and a desperate battle with merciless forces to keep life in sturdy bodies.

Why must these people be weaned from all that had made them what he knew them to be? Why must they be taught the life of a people who did not belong to their world? Why must they be softened by the white man's civilization? White man's houses? White man's stove heat? White man's food and drink? White man's ——?

No, no. White man contact was of no real benefit to these poor little people. He knew that. How bitterly he knew it! Was it mistaken humanitarianism, or—something worse?

His mood was unsparing after what he had so lately witnessed. He shook his head.

It was—something worse. What humanitarianism there might be in white man contact with his little people was confined to those to whom they meant no gain. It was trade, the hard, unscrupulous traffic of the north as exemplified by such men as Simon Duchette.

He knew beyond any sort of doubt that that was at the root of the trouble. The white man wanted furs. He wanted walrus ivory. He wanted minerals. He wanted the whole territory and all of value it could produce—for himself.

The Eskimo? Poor, happy, little, big-hearted creature, he must be made to serve. He must be cajoled with the lure of the white man's trade. Cajoled, and, if necessary, dragooned under—liquor. His purpose served, he no longer mattered.

Father Dan blew smoke. He was deeply disturbed. And his frowning gaze turned on the river mouth where the lake was storming, and where Simon's store lay hidden beyond the bend. That sickness and death he had just witnessed was only another link in the chain of evidence against Simon that was steadily accumulating. He had found the living crazy-drunk on his raw liquor. And he could only guess at the conditions of the others before they had died. He was weighted down at the thought of his own impotence. And it plunged him into something approaching downright despair.

His pipe went out and he re-lit it with a sulphur match,

and as he did so the growing darkness of his mood suddenly lightened.

It was a faint, prolonged hail. It came from up-river, in a child's piping voice that was only just audible in the bluster of the wind. He turned in the direction, and beheld a running figure, a slight, small creature seemingly all legs and arms, and streaming fair hair.

It was Mary. She was running with all her small might. And, loping at her side, keeping exact pace with her, was the dog, Benjie. And even in the distance Father Dan realized that she was shrilling at him breathlessly as she sped over the bowlder strewn foreshore with the nimble surefootedness of a young gazelle.

Father Dan stood up. And the glad smile of welcome in his twinkling eyes was good to see. Mary. Little Mary, whom the merest chance had originally brought into his life. Chance? It was a miracle that years ago he should have set out on that errand of mercy that had carried him to the very fringe of the desolate plateau of Unaga.

Even now, the memory of that time stirred him with the terror of the thought of what might have happened to the starving white babe he had rescued. A diseased and starving settlement of nearly five hundred dusky souls. When he reached it, all that were left of them were twenty or so Caribou-Eater squaws, and—Mary.

How the babe had come to be with them he had never been able to find out. The hopeless, sickened women either could not, or would not tell. The only clue to the little creature's identity had lain in a small beaded buckskin pouch securely sewn to an undergarment that was almost in rags. It contained a note scrawled in pencil—an ill-written note in the words of a man of heart, purpose, and intelligence. Father Dan recalled the contents of the letter now. It was a memory that would remain with him always.

"Mary Melrose. Only child of Gordon and Esther Melrose —duly married. Save her and be good to her. She's all I've got. The last food is hers. I can't live more than hours. She's just a little white bit that only counts to me. God'll bless the folk who save her better than I can. She's just three.

GORDON MELROSE."

The babe had been a tiny bag of bones—a mere skeleton, but a healthy, living skeleton. And, by the mercy of Providence, she had lived—lived, and thrived, and grown herself into a place in a heart that was hers for all time.

And now, as Father Dan watched the speeding figure racing along the river shore toward him, he felt that he had received more, much more than the simple God's blessing which that desperate father had called down upon him.

But, quite suddenly, his smiling turned to anxiety. It was a lull in the wind which left the girl's cries clearer, more distinct. There was a note in them. It was different. Mary was not just greeting him. It was the stricken note of a child well-nigh beside herself. Terror sounded in those cries. Sheer terror.

With a sudden gesture Father Dan snatched his pipe from his mouth and ran. But it was only for a few paces. Mary's flailing arms were flung up waving him back. And now he made out the words she was shrieking at him.

"Go back!" she shrilled. "The boat! Oh, quick! The boat! It's Auntie Evie! She's fallen! She's hurt dreadful! Andy says she's dead. But she's not, Daddy Dan! She's alive, an' I've seen her breathe!"

It was the sheltered backwater which Father Dan knew well enough, and had always doubted. It was less than a quarter of a mile up-river from the Forsyth home, and on the same bank. It was a wide basin washed out of the soft soil by the drive of the river in flood time, just where the confining cliffs of the gorge relaxed their grip on it and loosed it upon low silt shores.

The place formed a precious swimming pool. And it was deep and almost without stream. For the most part its shores were low, and the water was easy of access. But its western side was walled by frowning cliff banks, high, flat-topped, and overhanging. They rose sheer from the depths of the water, and were approached by a precipitous climb over lichen-grown rocks.

Father Dan eyed the ascent with frowning concern as his canoe shot into the backwater from the river. For he knew that cliff to be the high-diving place beloved of the

children and of Evie Forsyth, and to be the cause of his rush to rescue now.

A swift searching survey of the broken ascent told the missionary all he wanted to know, and corroborated the almost incoherent story which Mary had told him. There was the place, high up, nearly at the top, where Evie had slipped on the moist, spongy masses of lichen. Great lumps of the fungus growths had been torn away from their precarious hold upon the rock. She must have fallen over twenty feet.

He drove his paddle with urgency. And, in a few moments, the nose of the canoe ran up the soft silt of the shore just below where the red head of Andy stood out like a beacon light. The boy was standing beside the sprawled body of his mother, and unashamed tears were rolling down his freckled cheeks.

The woman's broken body was still in its swimming suit. Her beautifully shaped limbs were bare to the sun pouring down upon them. Her head was still closely capped for the high diving that had brought about the disaster.

The man in Father Dan was deeply stirred at the sight of that slim young body lying so helplessly across the great bowlder upon which it had fallen. But his feelings had nothing to do with any impression her sex or beauty might have been expected to make. It was sheer pity—the concern of a kindly man in face of suffering.

Evie was on her back, which was cruelly bent at a terrible angle over the sharp edge of the bowlder. And she looked like nothing so much as some human offering on an altar of sacrifice. She was alive, and breathing heavily. But she was moaning. Her eyes were closed, and blood was oozing from under her back and flowing down the gray sides of the stone.

Father Dan straightened up from his first swift examination. Just for a moment his troubled gaze considered the tumultuous heaving of the beautifully swelling bosom and he listened to the disturbing moan that came with each inhalation. He now knew the disaster to be infinitely greater

than he had believed possible. And he knew he must make a swift decision.

At last he looked up. Andy was facing him and was fully clad. He was standing close to his mother on the other side of the rock. His tear-stained face was raised in voiceless appeal to the one man, in his father's absence, on whom he knew he could rely. Mary was close beside him, so close that her gentle purpose was simply obvious. Andy was in trouble. Andy was suffering. There were no tears in Mary's big eyes. They just gazed and gazed at the injured mother. Nor was there a tremor in the small brown hand that was warmly clasping one of her playmate's. She gave never an outward sign of the agony of grief she was bravely enduring.

Father Dan signed to Andy.

"We must lift her," he said. And, stooping, he set his powerful arms about the woman's slim body.

Then followed an exhibition of the readiness which had bred itself into these children of the North. Between them Andy and Mary supported the warm, bare legs. And the injured woman was gently laid out where the silt of the shore was clear of stones. After that Father Dan cleansed and dressed the lacerated back while the children assisted in every direction required of them.

It was a prolonged task of the first-aid order. But at last it was completed, and Father Dan bent over his suffering patient.

"I'm going to get you to home, Evie," he said, gently. "Can you hear me?"

Mary and Andy waited almost breathlessly for the beloved voice to answer. To their young minds so much seemed to depend on it. At last it came; a faint but clear whisper.

"Yes."

A deep sigh broke from the boy. And Mary's hand again sought one of his.

"We're going to carry you to the boat. Can you—stand it?" Father Dan's tone was very gentle.

At the sound of it tears again welled into Andy's eyes. But he brushed them away.

"Andy'll help. So will Mary," Father Dan went on. "We'll do it as easy as we can. It's the only way."

"Andy? Mary? Yes. I'm—I'm so cold. My legs ——"

The whisper trailed away in an agonizing moan, and Father Dan signed quickly to Mary.

"Beat it down to the boat, child," he said, sharply. "Get into the water, and hold it broadside to the bank. Hold it the far side. Andy and I'll carry her."

It was a desperate decision and Father Dan knew it. But he could see no help for it. He knew the injured woman was paralyzed from the waist downwards, and there was only one conclusion to be drawn from the fact. Besides her terrible lacerations her back was broken. She would die. It might be hours, or even days. So he must get her to her home where a bed might ease her last hours of suffering. It was all he could do, all he could hope to do. And he must do it—at once.

Mary was down at the water's edge with the canoe in readiness. Andy was left to help Father Dan in the heart-rending task of adding to his mother's suffering.

He faced it with a courage that was at its last extremity by the time it was accomplished, so that when his mother opened her eyes, and even struggled to thank him with a smile as she lay in the bottom of the canoe, endurance became no longer possible. Without waiting for the boat's departure he snatched at Mary's willing hand, and the two set off at a run to reach home first.

CHAPTER VI

COMRADES IN AFFLICTION

They were sitting in a row outside the hut from which no sound reached them. There were just the three. Andy was nearby to the closed door. Mary was as close to him as her slight body could crowd. Benjie, the dog, was squatted on his haunches beside his little mistress. The dog's jaws were agape, and his tongue lolling, and the flies were irritating him. He was panting but alert, his fierce eyes furtively watchful, and his upstanding ears twitching as though listen-

ing acutely. It seemed almost as if the dog understood. As though he, too, were filled with anxiety for the news that was yet to come.

Andy was staring straight across at the far side of the river. Misery looked out of every line of a face that was usually given to happy laughter. His hands were clasped about bare knees, and he was hugging them as though endeavoring to keep his restless limbs still. He was thinking with all the lurid coloring of a child's imagination. And it was of the dreadful wound he had seen in his mother's back. Yes, he had seen the ghastly flow of his mother's blood, and the horror of it overwhelmed him.

Mary, too, was staring out across the river. And her imagination was no less a-riot. But she had none of the lurid vision of her playmate. She was striving with all her small might in a search for encouragement with which to come to Andy's rescue. With an amazing effort of childish will she was stifling her own feelings for the sake of the other.

But she found it so difficult. It seemed such a long, long time that they had been waiting since they had helped to carry Auntie Evie in to her bed. And after turning them both out of the house Daddy Dan seemed as if he was never coming to them with his promised news. Mary had well-nigh exhausted her stock of encouragement. And Andy's eyes would keep watering and making her feel badly.

In the silence that had prolonged, it was Andy's intermittent sniffs that at last stirred Mary to a further desperate effort.

"Why does it make us want to cry when folks get hurt?" she asked, with a suspicious catch in her voice. "My eyes keep watering like—like anything. And it's silly. It won't help Auntie Evie, will it? So I'm not going to cry. I won't! Nor mustn't you. Will you? 'Cos when you cry, it makes me want to, worse. And—and I hate crying like—like a fool kid."

"I'm not crying," Andy denied, fiercely. "I don't have to cry. Mumsy's going to be fine when Uncle Dan's fixed her. It's—it's the sun, I guess. It sets my eyes smarting."

Mary nodded in solemn agreement, and blinked the moisture away out of her own eyes.

"Sure it's the sun," she said. "And the flies and things. It's always that way. Flies are ter'ble. Why do they get in your eyes when they're wet? The eyes I mean."

Andy hugged his knees together and rocked his body.

"I dunno," he declared. "They're fool things anyway. I hate 'em." He dug his bare heels deeply into the soft soil.

"So do I," Mary admitted. "Oolinak says flies is hell. An' Benjie hates them, too." She turned to the dog beside her, and stroked its head. In an instant the lolling tongue flapped at her soft cheek.

"Don't do that, you bad Benjie," she cried, caressingly. "You just lie right down with your great big paws out. That way," she went on, arranging the dog's feet as the brute obeyed her. "Now go to sleep. And when you wake up—when you wake up, why, Auntie Evie'll be better. Ever so better. Heaps better. 'Cos Daddy Dan's fixing her. And Daddy Dan's wonnerful fixing sick folks. Maybe we'll all go swimming again ——"

"I won't ever go swimming again—ever!" Andy burst out in a passion of grief.

Mary's big, soft eyes smiled tearfully around on him.

"Oh, yes, you will, Andy, dear," she said, in a prim little motherly way. "Auntie Evie an' us all'll go swimming soon. Sure. Maybe tomorrow. Yes. I wouldn't be su'prised if Auntie Evie was swimming tomorrow. It's—it's awfu' good for wounds. 'Specially when they bleed—lots."

Andy's red head lifted. The vivid blue of his eyes stared widely. They were turned on Mary, full of awe and terror.

"You saw it!" he cried. "It was all running down that—that stone! It was Mumsy's—blood! My—my Mumsy's!" he finished up, piteously.

Something of the boy's agony took hold of Mary. In a moment all her effort at calm was broken down. Tears welled and fell as she reached out and clutched Andy's arm with tenacious fingers.

"We'd ought to've washed it off," she cried. "We got to! We must! We can't leave it there! It's—it's Auntie Evie's. We'll take a scrubber an' soap after Daddy Dan comes an' tells us she's all fixed good. If we don't—if we don't ——" Her voice trailed away.

"How long do you guess he'll be now?" Andy broke in desperately.

"Soon. Very soon. He's quick fixing folks—mostly."

"He knows about fixing—blood?"

"Everything."

"Sure?"

"Ever so sure."

Andy heaved a deep sigh and turned again to the river. Mary's clutch relaxed, and her small hand slipped down to the boy's, and clasped it warmly.

"She—she tried to smile at us, Andy, dear," she reminded him, softly. "That'll tell you. 'Cos folks don't try to smile 'less they's better. I'm glad—ever so glad—she's better. I'm glad for her 'cos I love her. I'm glad for you too, Andy, dear. Won't it be just swell when Daddy Dan's fixed her so she can come and sit right here in the door? And when your Daddy comes she'll be fine. And she'll be all laffing and—and —— Oh, I do love your Mumsy, and I wish she wasn't hurted!"

It came with a big sigh, and all a child's simple abandon. The loyal little creature was doing her small all for the other's comfort. And she had her reward. Andy's strong hand gripped hers tightly. It gripped so tightly that it hurt her. But that hurt was the most precious thing in the world to Mary.

They sat on in silence. The weary time dragged. Then, at last, there came a sound. It was the sound of Father Dan moving within the house.

It was a moment of breathless suspense. The clasping hands clung. Mary wanted to speak, but something seemed to be choking her. Andy could think of nothing. He just stared and stared. And the heart in him pounded his ribs.

The sounds drew nearer. They were just the other side of the closed door. Benjie's great muzzle was raised and turned. His ears twitched. He, too, was listening with all his might.

Suddenly, the door opened very quietly behind them.

Father Dan's trouble was the worst he had ever known in all his years at Lake Whitewater. He stood beside the

bed and gazed down on the injured woman who was enjoying respite from excruciating sufferings in the deep sleep into which he had been forced to drug her. He was trying to reassure himself as to the course he knew he must pursue —to reconcile his priestly conscience. It was difficult. It was painful, even heartbreaking.

Father Dan had a great and very real friendship for Larry Forsyth. It was that instinctive, unconsidered friendship of one simple soul for another. And it was a friendship he extended in no small measure to the woman he was now striving to succor. His every sympathy was astir for them both, and for the boy who was even now awaiting him outside.

All he could do to relieve the injured woman's sufferings had been done. There was nothing more that would serve her at the moment. Her heavy breathing told of a sleep that would ease the shock of her disaster. But he was under no illusion. All he could hope for was to ease her sufferings —until the end. That was all.

The whole thing was beyond any earthly help. Her back was broken somewhere high up in her chest. She might live for hours. She might even live for days. But without morphia her sufferings would be unendurable. The greatest horror of the whole thing, as Father Dan saw it, was that although her body below the break was paralyzed, useless, and without feeling, her brain was clear. She was fully conscious, and sensible of the agony of it all.

He stood gazing down at the bed, watching the struggle of the poor creature's straining lungs, and thinking of the man who would come home from his secret work at Big Waters. He knew that the task of imparting the terrible tidings would have to be his. He would have to look on while a man's every hope and yearning was crushed out of his soul.

But these things were incomparably less hurtful to Father Dan than was his thought of the two children waiting outside for that which he must tell them now. Could he go out there and break that boy's heart with the truth? Could he stand by while Mary's eyes filled with tears of grief? Had he the right to do those things? In the interests of truth

he supposed he had. But he knew that he had no intention of doing anything of the sort. He would go out to them and —lie.

Andy must be spared if it cost him a hundred lies. He must be told that his mother was sleeping. That her pain had gone. That her wound was comfortably dressed. He must be allowed to see her, and kiss her, and believe her to be on the high road to recovery. Father Dan knew that the whole thing would be a cruel prevarication.

Yes, Andy must be allowed to kiss the lovely creature who had borne him. Then he must be kept away until the —end. It was the only way by which to soften the blow that must ultimately be dealt him.

Father Dan moved noiselessly out of the room. He closed the outer door of the hut behind him and stood blinking in the fierce sunlight. Benjie was on his feet regarding him. Mary gazed at him with the whole of her child's soul in her eyes. Andy still remained looking out over the river.

"She's asleep, kiddies."

It was said in a tone no child could misinterpret. Nor was it intended that they should. The man's deep-set eyes had conjured a smile to match his announcement. And forthwith Mary hurled herself at him while Benjie licked his hand.

"She's better! Oh, Daddy Dan, I'm—I'm crazy glad!" Mary turned. With a rush she was upon her playmate, and her arms were flung about his neck. "You hear, you Andy," she cried. "She's better! Ever so! She's sleeping! Daddy Dan's fixed her. I *knew* he would! She'll get well quick!"

Father Dan watched the scene with a heart that was well-nigh breaking. He moved to where Andy was still squatting, and laid an infinitely tender hand on the bristle of red hair.

"I want you kiddies to be very good now and do just as I say," he said. "It's for her, Andy, boy. It's so she shan't have a thing to worry with while she's sick."

Andy stood up. The two children stood together in front of him voiceless and expectant. Father Dan saw the dawning hope in the blue of Andy's eyes and he looked quickly away.

"I'm going to take you both in to see her now," he said. "And, if you can both be very, very quiet, and not disturb her, you shall kiss her. Then you must—both—go on up to

the Mission and stop right there. When she wakes you shall come down again to see her and speak to her. And then she'll be able to tell you just how she's going on. She must sleep. And rest. Will you do the way I want? You, Andy, boy?"

The boy's eyes had cleared. There were no longer tears in them. They shone with sudden confidence and hope.

"I'll do just everything you say, Uncle Dan," he promised on the instant. "Everything! I can see her—now?"

"Yes."

Father Dan looked on from the foot of the bed. The room was in shadow, for the curtain had been pulled across its only window. The man kept a smile about his lean face. But it was set and something unreal. Nevertheless, it served. The children believed in that smile and were almost happy.

Andy tip-toed to the side of the bed. He took Mary with him, clinging to her hand as though fearful of losing her. Their bare feet gave out no sound on the hard earth floor. And they stole up as though the slightest sound might disturb the beloved sleeper.

They stood for a moment contemplating the beautiful face, so peaceful under the drug that soothed. And Father Dan, behind the set of his smile, endured the full horror of the deception he was practicing.

Then Andy leaned forward. There was a moment. Then his lips lightly pressed themselves on the living cheek. He drew away with obvious reluctance and looked on while Mary did the same. The mother remained undisturbed. She lay there like the human log she actually was.

As Mary drew back, Father Dan sighed deeply. Then, as two pairs of questioning eyes turned up to him he indicated the door with a movement of his hand. He watched them go. Hand in hand they tip-toed out of that room of death all unaware of the last farewell they had just taken.

They were two different children who ran with Benjie at their heels on their way to the Mission and Jane Hesther. There were no tears now. Only a great stirring of hope, and complete confidence in the man they had left behind. And

Father Dan felt, as he watched them go, that his reward was out of all proportion to his merit.

He watched them till they passed out of view. Then he moved around to the back of the house and sought Trudie.

The half-breed was in her cook-house. She was squatting in a corner of it on an up-turned dry-goods box. He found her rocking herself to and fro in a state of mental anguish. Her cooking was still in progress by the appetizing smell of broiled fish. But she was giving it no heed. She was absorbed in her trouble to the exclusion of everything else.

Father Dan understood the further task with which he was faced and had no scruples in dealing with it. For all she was a half-breed, Trudie was no better than the rest of his native flock. Death and sickness were her native horror. And he knew it would require a firm hand to make her carry out his orders.

"Trudie," he said sharply, "you've got to stop around and care for Missie Evie. You understand? There won't be a deal to do. Except just stop around. You can fix some soup. And maybe we can get her to take it when she wakes. I'll do that. You get me?"

The swaying figure ceased its movement. Big, goggling eyes full of dread were raised to the unsmiling face of the man of whom she stood in profound awe.

"Missie all go dead," she whined. "What for us 'm all stop around? Her'm not mak wake—never. Him spirit all'm tak her sure. Trudie stops? Then spirit all 'm tak her, too. Yes. Trudie not stop 'round. No."

Father Dan raised a hand and passed it back over his graying hair. As he did so he straightened up his powerful body to its full height. Then he flung a warning finger, pointing.

"You'll do as I say," he said, sharply. "Missie Evie's not dead. Maybe she won't die. But she will if you quit her so she's got nothing to eat. And if she does I'll send for the white police. And they'll put a rope around your neck, and —kill you. That's sure. Dead sure! If you quit her they'll hang you with a walrus rawhide on one of the trees back of the Mission, and the wicked spirits'll get you. You'll stop around and make soup!"

"Us say'm no good. Not. Missie Evie all die soon quick. Trudie know. The spirit come ——"

"You'll stop around!"

The man's tone was compelling. And he won his way. Trudie rocked herself and avoided his angry eyes. And presently she wagged her head and sighed.

"Us 'm all stop around," she muttered, reluctantly. "It no good. The spirit ——"

But Father Dan waited for no more. He left the superstitious creature to her qualms, confident she would obey. And he hurried back to his library to read up anything that might serve him in his hopeless task.

CHAPTER VII

OOLINAK IN THE NIGHT

Father Dan closed the small wooden chest and considered it thoughtfully. Then he returned it to the cupboard from which he had taken it, and padlocked the door. It was the chest which contained his supply of drugs, and was his most treasured possession.

He had made a disquieting discovery. His supply of morphia was very low, and he had never required an ample supply more surely than he did just now. Evie might live for days, possibly weeks. And she must not be allowed to suffer if he could help it.

He bestowed an empty, stoppered bottle in a pocket, picked up his cloth cap, and passed out of his makeshift hospital.

Father Dan was physically weary. But he refused to admit it even to himself. It had been somewhere in the middle of the night, that night which was yet broad daylight, that he had set out on his return journey from the south shore of the lake. He had made sixty-odd miles in difficult currents only to find another call for succor awaiting him at his journey's end. It was now late afternoon and he had known no sleep for over twenty-four hours.

He set out for Simon Duchette's store with his empty

bottle. Simon usually had a supply of drugs. There was a chance that the trader would be able to help him.

The Eskimo, Oolinak, was squatting at the door of a small hut where the winter sleds were stored. He was at work repairing a tangle of harness. He was a squat, broad creature without any of the fat of his woman, Jane Hesther. His years were mature, and he used speech only when it was unavoidable.

The man grinned as Father Dan came toward him. His lank, black hair framed a face that was sheerly honest. It also hung upon his massive shoulders and greased his seal parka. His heavy, coarse lips exposed two even rows of exquisite teeth which helped to radiate the good nature which his usual silence did its best to conceal.

He was stitching the hide thongs with a long, thin walrus-ivory needle which was a perfect weapon of his own fashioning. His sewing was of the neatest, the most exact. But, then, Oolinak was that rarity among Eskimos—a man who counted his trail dogs as something better than an emergency ration in lean times.

The sight of the man reminded Father Dan. He felt fairly confident that Trudie would obey his orders and remain with the injured woman. But he could not be certain. He indicated the pile of harness.

"How soon you be through?" he asked.

Oolinak glanced over the tangle. He shook his head and his hands gestured widely.

"Not," he said.

Father Dan considered.

"So," he said. "No. There's a lot there. Well, I guess there's two months to winter anyway. You'll need to quit in a while. After you feed your dogs, I want you to get around Missie Forsyth's shack. She's sick. Very sick. You'll need to stop around there all night while I sleep, and see Trudie doesn't quit. She's got a scare. She's a foolish woman. You're a brave man. If she makes a break to quit you come fetch me quick."

The passing of Oolinak's grin left his cheerful face a study in doubt. Father Dan understood. The foolish superstitition of these people was common to all. He waited.

Oolinak bent over his stitching, and his queer needle stabbed his work with slightly unnecessary force.

"Us go," he said.

It was little better than a grunt. But it was definite. And, knowing the man, the missionary understood he could rely implicitly on that given word. Oolinak might fear. He might hate proximity with disease and possibly death. But Oolinak was his bond slave who would obey his lightest order to the letter.

"Good man, Oolinak," he said, kindly, and passed on in the direction of the lake.

The boy Jean discovered Father Dan's approach. He was on his way up to the store from the native encampment where most of his leisure was spent among the young women who were glad enough to smile on the son of the man who meant so much in their lives. He hurried and reached the store first, where his mother was at work clearing up after the day's trade.

"Father Dan comin' along up quick," he warned her, his pale eyes urgent. "Guess he's almost on the run."

Lola turned from her shelves. Her dark eyes snapped.

"On the run?" she questioned. "What's his trouble?"

"How'd I know? I just see him."

"Go, tell your father, then—quick! He's along inside."

Lola did not return to her shelf. At the door her sharp eyes peered out at the approaching figure, which was certainly hurrying. A visit from Father Dan was never without interest for her if only for its rarity, and the fact that she was well enough aware of the missionary's disapproval of both herself and her man. She wondered what was bringing him in—a hurry. She knew he had been away to the south of the lake ministering to sick fishing Indians who were customers of hers. She knew he had returned only that noon. She had seen him pull into the river. Was it complaint that was bringing him? Father Dan's complaints always ran on the same lines. Liquor.

She was all smiles when Father Dan came up.

"I need help, ma'am," he said at once, and with a gesture of the hands that told of real concern. "I'm running out of

morphia, and I'm needing it badly, very badly. It's Evie Forsyth. She took a bad fall at the swimming pool. She was climbing for a dive, and dropped over twenty feet on a sharp rock. Her back's broken. It's terrible. There's not a thing I can do but ease her sufferings with morphia. She can't live for more than hours or days. And her agony ——"

"Broken her back?"

It was the cold voice of Simon Duchette who had moved up noiselessly into the doorway behind the stout form of his wife. His eyes were blank of all expression. They just looked steadily into the face of the missionary.

"Come right inside," he went on, as Father Dan nodded and gestured hopelessly. "I'll be glad to help."

Father Dan passed into the store and leaned against the stout barrier which was set up as a counter to keep the stock on the shelves safe from predatory customers. Simon had turned his back to it and was standing with arms spread out, and hands gripping its stout edge. His cold stare was directed through the open doorway.

"You're needin' morphy?" he said. "Well, I guess I got a dope of it. That'll be all right. Tell me things."

Father Dan sighed relief. His deep-set eyes scanned the strong profile of the man whom he knew to be a curse to the poor souls he was there to serve, and whom he knew to be the archenemy of Larry Forsyth and all who belonged to him. He wondered at the thought lying behind that cold invitation.

"There's nothing but what I said," he replied. "She was climbing the cliff bank. It's thick with lichen. The stuff tore away under her feet. And she—crashed below. A rock. A big one with a knife-edged top. It's broken her so she's going to die. And that's what's waiting for Larry when he gets back. It's so shocking I—I daren't think. That poor kiddie! Poor Larry! Do you see? He was quitting this fall. Quitting for good. He'd all he wanted for them all. And now ——"

Feeling was in every word Father Dan uttered. He knew he was talking to a man without sympathy. He knew Simon had left nothing undone to discover Larry's secret, and to jump in for a share of the man's spoils. He knew he would

do anything and everything to despoil him. But in his grief all these things were forgotten.

"You need the dope to kill her pain, I guess?" Simon asked, coldly.

Father Dan inclined his head.

"It's the only thing," he said. "The poor thing's head's alive to her bodily pain. She's fully conscious of everything. It's only from her waist down she's dead. She'll be like that so long as she can breathe. She's enduring a hell of pain. She's got to have morphia. It's the only ease we can give her."

Simon bestirred abruptly.

"Wait around. You can have all I got," he said, in the same cold way. "It's not a deal. But maybe it'll see her through."

He passed into the living room. When he returned he was carrying a small, stoppered bottle.

"You need to go easy with it," he said. "I don't get more till my freight comes through from Good Hope about freeze-up. But I'm glad if it's a help."

Father Dan accepted the bottle eagerly.

"How much?" he inquired

Simon's shoulders went up.

"Nix," he said, and again leaned back against his counter.

For a moment Father Dan warmed toward the man whom he knew to be wholly evil. Then he caught the cold gleam of the dead eyes and his feeling passed. He thanked Simon hurriedly and prepared to depart.

"How long you guess she'll live?" Lola spoke without turning back from her shelves.

"Maybe days. Maybe she'll be dead in the morning. You see," Father Dan went on, glad enough to be speaking to the woman rather than Simon, "the break's high up. Back of her lungs. That's worst, short of her neck. If it had been lower down she might have lingered months or even years. She'll die quick. And Larry ——"

He broke off with a despairing gesture and moved to go.

"Would it be good for us to take her anything?" Lola asked. She had turned from her shelves now, and there was a keen searching in her sharp eyes.

Father Dan shook his head.

"It wouldn't be good for folks to see her," he said. "I've got Trudie stopping around. That's all. And she won't go in to her. Andy's along up with me. No. Thank you kindly, ma'am. But you best not. She'll be under morphia, anyway."

"Asleep?" Lola's eyes were still searching.

"She'll be awake and conscious at intervals. This," he said, holding up his newly acquired bottle, "will just ease her. And it's all I can do. Thanks, Simon," he went on, turning to the other. "I'll get along down right away and fix her for the night."

They watched the big figure go. Lola was standing against her counter leaning over it. Simon's dead eyes were gazing out through the open doorway. He was still leaning with his hands gripping the counter on either side of him. And that which was passing behind his eyes found no expression.

At last the woman bestirred. She edged almost directly behind Simon and spoke in a whisper.

"Maybe she'll die tonight," she said. "Anyway, he figures she will tomorrow. I allow he knows. You ain't got it yet, Simon. An' those bums you got trailing him look to me like two cents. She's sick. But she'll have her senses at times. She knows, I guess. Why not? There won't be only Trudie. Well?"

Simon removed one hand from the counter. He took his plug of tobacco from his shirt pocket and bit into it. Then he returned it to its place with deliberation.

"Sure," he said, his strong jaws working. Then his eyes came around and contemplated Lola blankly. "Don't worry," he said. "She'll talk, if I need to choke it out of her."

It was nearing midnight, and the broad light of day was still ample for Father Dan's needs. He rose from the rough stool before his little table on which was the bulky medical tome which he had just finished consulting. He had spent hours in the eager hope of discovering something by which he might further help his patient. There was nothing now for him to do but seek that rest he so sorely needed. So he closed the outer door of the hut and turned to his bed.

He began to remove his rusty outer garments. But with

the removal of his coat a thought occurred to him. He would take a last peek at the children who were sharing Mary's room for the night. Tomorrow they would divide the room in two by setting up a blanket partition.

He moved over to the doorway and gently opened the door. The window of the room had been darkened by a sheet of sacking, and, for a few moments, he could see very little. But by degrees he made out the bunk which was Mary's. She was lying under a blanket curled up on her side with her hands clasped together under one cheek.

Then he turned to the opposite wall and beheld Andy sprawled on a blanket on the earthen floor. His lean young body was covered with a fur sled-robe, and his flaming head seemed a brilliant part of it. He was frankly snoring, and the missionary withdrew and let the curtain fall back in its place. He sighed profoundly. Then he turned to pass back to his own bunk.

But he did not reach it. There was a sound beyond his door, the pad of moccasined feet. A moment later the broad, flat face of Oolinak peered into the room.

Father Dan was startled.

"Well?" he whispered, urgently. "What's amiss?"

"Trudie."

Oolinak made a movement of both hands slantingly upwards.

"Gone?"

"So."

The Eskimo nodded and his eyes began to roll.

"I see 'm this man," he grunted. "Him mak it by river. All kyak. Us come tell 'm boss Trudie all gone. Us see 'm man's go by river quick."

"Who?"

"Boss Simon."

"Up-river?"

"So."

Oolinak pointed. His arm was flung out in the direction of Larry Forsyth's home.

Father Dan went back to his bunk. In a few moments he rejoined the waiting Eskimo. He had pulled his coat on

again. And as he came out he was thrusting something into one of its pockets.

CHAPTER VIII

STARK EVIL

THEY moved swiftly in the shadow of the woodlands which backed the Mission. It was Father Dan who chose the cover. Nor did he offer explanation even to himself. Years of experience in contact with raw human nature had sharpened instinct to knife-edge keenness. And he yielded to it now without question.

Oolinak had seen Simon Duchette on the river, passing up in the direction of Larry Forsyth's home. It was midnight. What interest had Simon to keep him from his blankets at that hour, and send him up-river in—that direction? The question had leaped to Father Dan's mind, but he sought no answer. Action would serve far better.

It was still broad daylight. But the sky was overcast. Father Dan had no concern for the chill drifting out of the north. He had no concern for anything but to cover the short distance between his Mission and the dying woman as quickly as possible. His urge was tremendous. For he knew all that lay between Simon Duchette and Larry Forsyth. His knowledge stirred a vague, but very definite apprehension in him now, and his pace through the woods kept the Eskimo almost on the trot at his heels.

Simon's kyak was lying at the water's edge immediately below Larry's hut. It was hauled out of the stream, and realization of this fact set the hot blood surging to Father Dan's head. He had warned Simon and Lola that Evie must not be disturbed. They had accepted his warning. And now ——!

As he came to the hut, for one brief instant, the missionary stared down at the empty craft. Then, a moment later, he was at the open window which gave on to Evie's sleeping quarters.

Quite what he expected to see, or intended to do, he did

not pause to consider. A smoldering rage had taken possession of him and urged him. Was it another of those attempts of which Larry had told him, and over which he had so often laughed? Had Simon come down there to search while Evie was lying practically a dead thing in her bed? Was he using her disaster as a means to further his campaign against her husband? Father Dan's lean face set grimly.

He peered cautiously in at the window. He was looking to assure himself that the dying woman had in no way been disturbed. But on the instant almost he flung caution to the winds, and was making for the entrance door around the angle of the building.

Simon Duchette was at Evie's bedside. He was bending over it, his lean body and crouching attitude giving him something of the appearance of a creature of prey contemplating its victim. His white-ringed eyes, those baleful, cruel eyes, deepened the impression. And they seemed to hold the wide, soft, gray eyes of the dying woman fascinated. He was compelling her with all his ruthless will.

Evie was struggling with the daze of mind wrought by the drug which had reduced her sufferings to something just endurable. But she was conscious. And in her consciousness she was panic-stricken under the dread of that threatening presence. Her breathing was desperately labored. But even in the dread of the moment, all her will, and such of her wrecked body as would function, were fighting for a life she knew to be fast ebbing.

She gasped out a woman's pitiful defiance.

"Go!" she cried, in a choking voice. "Go—at—once! How —how—dare you come—here? I'll—tell—you nothing," she labored. "I—don't—know. But I—wouldn't tell—you—if I did. Go! Go awa ——"

Her voice stifled in a choking cough. Simon bent lower. His hands moved. They moved with fingers outspread like talons. They were raised in her full view. And they came down toward her soft white throat in direful threat. But they came to rest on the pillow on either side of it.

"But you're goin' to tell," he snarled, seeming to speak through gritted teeth and tight lips, "because you *do* know.

You don't fool me, my girl. An' you ain't goin' to escape me 'cos you're sick an' dyin'. Sure you ain't. You're goin' to hand me the name of the stuff he's tradin'. Just the name of it. That's all. 'Cos if you don't, you can still feel. An' I'll make you feel. See? I'll choke the last spot of life out o' you with these two hands. Tell me quick before I lose pat ——"

"Quit it!"

Simon jerked upright and spun around.

It was Father Dan just within the doorway of the room. He was no longer the priestly missionary, but a furious human creature as ready to kill as any gunman. His deep-set eyes were narrowed and gleaming behind the snub muzzle of the weapon in his purposeful hand. He was a man driven to the limit of human fury.

"You cur! You miserable wretched creature!" he cried, with a violence such as the trader had never known in him before. "You'd torture that helpless soul on her deathbed! You'd threaten her to satisfy your merciless greed! You ——! No! Don't touch that 'forty-five' I see at your hip, or I'll drop you stone-dead as I would a plague-ridden rat! Stick your hands up! Both! And you get right out and back to your wretched Fort before I shoot the soulless wolf in you to death!"

Simon knew. He knew the priest, and he knew the man. And so his hands went up at once.

Father Dan stepped clear of the doorway. And instantly the figure of Oolinak appeared and the pad of his moccasined feet came to rest precisely where the missionary had been standing. Father Dan signed to him.

"Get his gun," he ordered.

The Eskimo moved. It was the movement of some creature of the wild. He literally leaped to obey. In a moment the trader's gun was dragged from his hip pocket.

"Now beat it!" Father Dan flung at Simon. "Go back to the Point! And quick! And don't try monkey-tricks. This boy'll trail you home, and he has my orders to drop you in your tracks with your own gun if you try to stop by the way. If you've done hurt to this poor woman, I'll have

you in police hands before the freeze-up. Now get out while I can still forget you're a hound of—Hell!"

Father Dan was standing in the doorway where Evie, in happier days, had been wont to sit with her work. He was watching. The kyak was rapidly making down the river. The faithful Oolinak was keeping pace with it on the run on the foreshore. And he knew that his orders would be carried out to the letter. He waited till the trader had vanished around the bend of the river. Then, with a sigh, he turned back into the house.

As he entered Evie's room he looked at once at the bed. The sick woman was lying just as she had lain throughout the recent ugly scene. She had not even turned her head or attempted to do so. He understood. It was her complete incapacity. But her struggle for breath seemed to have become more violent, and he hurried to the bedside. As the man gazed down at her he realized how nearly was death hovering.

But even in her death struggles Evie's soft, troubled eyes tried to smile up at him.

"Th—ank you," she gasped. "But he'd—have—had to—kill me. I—I—didn't—know. Larry wouldn't—tell me—because of—him. Oh, the—pain! Can—you? Can—you ——?"

Father Dan nodded. He turned away on the instant to prepare the injection. He was glad to. Glad to help her. The dying eyes could observe his movements. And they watched with pitiful yearning even while the dreadful battle for air went on. The gasping voice came again.

"Andy. He's—he's—safe—with you? He's ——"

"He's sharing Mary's room for tonight. Yes, he's safe. I give you my word no harm shall come to him. You—want to see him?"

"N-no." It was scarcely above a whisper. The mouth was widely agape, the lower jaw sagging. Veins stood out like ropes on the fair forehead that was cold with a death sweat.

"Don't—tell—Larry—'bout—Simon. Tr-ouble. Don't tell. I ——"

Father Dan plunged his needle into the soft neck. He knew the poor creature was going rapidly now. It was all he

could do. He was not even sure if he were doing right in the circumstances. He watched. The awful struggle for breath was hideous. But in spite of it the will seemed stronger than ever in those last moments. The whisper came again.

"Sure don't—tell. Promise. My—love—all—all. I'm—going. I—can't ——"

The change was sudden and dreadful. The struggle for air ceased with the last whispered word. There was collapse, the body sagging and seeming to shrink. The neck seemed to give way, too. And the oval of Evie's cheeks fell in. There was just a little flutter of the eyelids, a faint sigh, then the eyes stilled and stared.

Father Dan dropped to his knees at the bedside and prayed for the passing of a soul.

The canoe glided up to the rough landing that had been made directly below Larry's home. It was a largish craft, fashioned on the lines of an oomiak. It was deeply laden, too. But its freight was mostly concealed under the hide decking fore and aft.

For a moment its single occupant remained in his place amidships, while one strong hand gripped the thongs that held the landing to its mooring. A pair of wide blue eyes were gazing up at the silent house. They were lit by a happy smile of anticipation, a smile which illuminated the whole of the freckled face, right up to the cloth-visored cap concealing a shock of vivid red hair.

There was not only anticipation in the man's strong face, there was satisfaction, too. It was the satisfaction of a man at the end of a testing task. A task that has demanded the exercise of the whole of everything in him.

At last he drew a deep breath and flung his paddle ashore with a clatter. Then he bestirred, and his movements, unhurried, were yet swift. He stood up and stepped ashore. Then he hauled his craft clear of the stream so that it sat on the soft soil of the shelving bank. For a moment he gazed down at it, and the while the smile deepened in his

eyes. It was some thought that afforded him amusement, profound amusement, for, in a moment, he laughed outright.

Then he turned abruptly and hurried up to the home for which his weary body was yearning.

"God in Heaven! What's ——?"

Father Dan's dark head, with its mane of graying hair, was abruptly jerked up from the coverlet of the bed where his tired face had been buried in the palms of his hands. The eyes, so accustomed to twinkle with the kindly thought behind them, were widely startled as they stared around at the sound of that familiar voice.

They came to rest, horrified, on the slim, athletic figure of Larry Forsyth, enveloped in its stout, worn, buckskin parka. Larry was standing just within the doorway, aghast at the thing he beheld.

Father Dan raised one significant hand signing to him. Then he rose swiftly from his knees.

"Larry, boy," he said, in a low, deep tone as he moved across the room. "How can I tell you? How ——?"

He looked into the sun-tanned face which had blanched to a ghastly hue. Larry was gazing past him, beyond him, at the motionless thing on the bed.

"You're late, Larry," the distressed priest went on; "late by minutes only. She passed away less than half an hour ago. Boy, boy! What can I say? What can I do to help you?"

Father Dan gestured helplessly.

But, of a sudden, an iron grip fell on one of his arms. And the hoarse voice of Larry literally barked at him.

"Tell me!" he cried.

"It happened about noon today." One of Father Dan's strong hands pressed gently on the hand that gripped him. "It was at the swimming pool. She was climbing to that diving place on the rocks. The lichen tore away under her feet. She slipped, and—crashed. Crashed on a rock below. And when Mary fetched me I found her back was broken. I picked her up, and we brought her here. And I did all that

mortal man could. I didn't let her suffer too much. Half an hour back she could have spoken ——"

Father Dan never completed that which he was saying. There was a cry, a deep, inarticulate cry from the throat of the man whom he knew to be beyond any comfort he could administer. Larry's grip relaxed. In a moment he had dashed across to the bedside, and his arms were flung about the poor dead thing which in life had been the woman of all his worship.

CHAPTER IX

SWORD PLAY

Father Dan was just beyond his doorway. He was sitting on an up-turned bucket, which afforded little enough ease to his tired body. But, then, ease was his least concern just now. He just wanted to sit, while, intermittently, he endeavored to re-light a pipe the tobacco in which had long since been completely burnt out.

The chill wind from the lake was still blowing. It came in sharp gusts, moaning sadly, and stirring the stream of the river to a murmur of protest. But they were Nature sounds which only intensified the hush of a desolate world.

Father Dan was impervious to the chill. His deepest emotions were astir. And, in such condition, he had no thought for personal comfort or need. He was incapable of diverting his tired brain from a dreary review of the tragic happenings which had begun on the moment of his return from the south shore of the lake, and had only terminated at Evie Forsyth's graveside, in the woodland reservation at the back of the Mission that afternoon. He was thinking, too, of a man of strong courage beaten down to something like mental impotence by a voiceless, tearless grief.

He could not escape from it. He no longer tried to. He felt the whole thing to be a prolonged nightmare from which there could be no awakening—an added milestone in a life that was one long conflict with the ills besetting fellow creatures.

Poor Evie. Poor little Andy. Poor, poor Larry, with his laughing self-confidence and reckless courage.

It was all too devastating. It all seemed so wantonly unnecessary. It was as if the whole thing had been devilishly planned for the psychological moment when these poor souls had reached the very goal of their little human strivings. The pity of it!

Then there had been that other, which was quite apart from all the rest. That moment of his own self-revelation, when he had stripped himself stark of the veneer of his priestly calling, and stood out in the bone of his passionate manhood.

He was under no illusion. It was one of the blackest moments of his career. It had been a criminal act. And yet it had seemed so natural and right when he had looked over the sight of a lethal weapon at the man he was yearning to slay.

Now he was shocked. Now he felt that the crime of his act was little less than had been that which had provoked it. It was worse than reprehensible, and proved him unfit for the calling that was his. But, even so, he knew that he had meant it all, and under similar provocation he would do it all again. He knew that he had no regret for his act, but only warm satisfaction in it.

Yes, he had yearned to shoot Simon Duchette to death. And, even now, he saw no reason to repudiate that desire. It was the conflict of calling with manhood. And his tired eyes told how surely he realized the latter had won.

As he packed the pipe from the buckskin sack that served him, he became aware of voices that reached him from within the house. They came from the room where Mary and Andy should be sleeping. And he understood.

It was still going on—that queer, and, to him, almost unbelievable thing he had witnessed at the moment when he had been driven to break the news of disaster to the boy, Andy. Mary had instantly moved to the boy's side, and had slipped a hand within his. It had been done so unobtrusively, so simply, and naturally. And, metaphorically, since then, that little brown hand had never been withdrawn. In that moment Mary had been transformed into a small mother.

It was a very precious thought. Father Dan reveled in it. Mary had set herself the task of comfort and help. And, with undemonstrative persistence, she was still pursuing its achievement. It was a ray of bright light in a welter of darkness. Father Dan thanked God that Mary was Mary, and that she had been permitted to become the whole joy of his celibate life.

But soon the voices ceased and Father Dan understood. Nature and Mary had achieved a desired result. So, with his pipe well alight, he turned his mind to a decision which he knew he must take before he, himself, sought his much-needed rest.

It was difficult. Evie had begged for secrecy as to Simon's part in the doings of that night. She had implored him with almost her last breath. The matter had seemed of greater concern to her than even the desperate struggle for life she had been making. Should he yield to that demand?

Father Dan had understood the drift of Evie's urgency. It was just her woman's instinct rather than any considered judgment. Even in her death struggles her concern had been for the man and the child she was leaving behind. She had visualized Larry in open conflict with the ruthless Simon. And so she had feared. Was she right?

On the other hand, what might it not mean to Larry to be left in ignorance of the lengths to which Simon would go to discover his, Larry's secret? The man was desperate. He was driven because Larry intended quitting. Would Simon permit that going without strong, perhaps devilish, reaction?

Common sense replied in the negative. Father Dan shook his head. But even as he did so he became the victim of Evie's appeal. There was Andy.

There could be no doubt as to what would follow were Larry told of Simon's doings that night. Swift, open rupture with Simon, and of the most violent kind. It was conceivable that in such a case Andy might easily find himself not alone—motherless.

No, right or wrong, Evie must have her way.

Father Dan drew a deep breath. He felt the responsibility

of that decision. But he knew it was the only one. There was risk enough, anyway. But open rupture would be a disaster.

For awhile he smoked on, reviewing the position from every angle. Then, at last, he knocked out his pipe and rose from his uncomfortable bucket. He stretched his weary limbs preliminary to seeking his blankets. But he was not yet permitted to find them.

His keen ears were startled by a sound that came from the woods behind him. It was the sound of footsteps, and they were crunching over the underlay of dead pine cones. Furthermore, they were coming from the direction of the little Mission cemetery where Evie had been laid to rest.

The two men were standing together in the gray light of the nightless day. The clouds were heavy and full of threat. The missionary felt that any other condition would have been an anachronism.

Larry was staring out across the river at the dour barrens beyond. And, in one hand, he was carrying a heavily filled cartridge-belt to which were attached two holsters containing a pair of large-bore automatics. Father Dan was observing him.

He knew that here was a different man from the one he had last seen at the graveside of his wife. There were still the grayness, the drawn lines of suffering about the freckled face. But the eyes, the clear, blue, unsmiling eyes were alive. They were sanely gazing. They were, too, full of a steady resolve.

"I haven't come with a bunch of thanks, Father," Larry said, in a low tone that somewhat grated under the repression the man was exercising. "It's not my way to hand words that can't ever express the thing I'm feeling. Will you leave it that way, and let's talk awhile?"

Father Dan gestured with expressive hands.

"Thanks aren't needed except by folks who don't know each other. Sure we'll talk. It's good to talk. What's that gun outfit you're toting?"

Larry glanced down at the weapons in his hand.

"They're Dutch's. I took them from him up at Big Waters. I'm passing them to Simon."

Father Dan looked into the wide eyes that were raised to his.

"It's latish," he demurred. "Maybe he'll be abed."

"That's his worry. He's going to get them tonight. Dutch may be in tomorrow. And, anyway, I'm pulling out south as quick as I can pack a grubstake. I'm not stopping around for a thing—now."

"No. You're quitting—with Andy?"

Larry stared down at the ruffled waters below them. The resolute expression still looked out of his eyes. But now there was something else. It was a queer little frown of anxiety.

"Not this trip," he said, decidedly.

Then he raised a hand and thrust back his cap. And he passed his fingers nervously across his forehead.

"Hell!" he burst out, suddenly. "What's the use? I feel——! But I won't. No. I guess it's just life. The cast-iron of life. And I've got to see it through the same as anyone else who reckons he's the shape of a man. It's tough! God! It's tough! You know, Father, it's mighty hard to see when the light of your life's snuffed plumb out. I got to shut it away! Hide it! Carry on!"

"Sure," Father Dan's steady eyes held the other's. "I buried three young buck Neches on the south shore of the lake two days back. There were three young lone squaws left with their papooses. The south shore, boy! Barren rock! Tundra! No feed but the fish in the lake! They'll carry on—too."

Larry nodded.

"Yes," was all he said.

"Tell me."

Larry hunched his shoulders like a man striving to fling off a burden that was weighting them down.

"It's the biggest dope of stuff I could bring down without Simon getting wise," he said. "It'll double my wad down at Leaping Horse, when I've traded. I daren't have Andy with me on the trip. I've a hunch. And it's ugly."

"That'll hurt the boy bad—just now."

Larry's fingers raked the vivid hair under his cap.

"Sure, I know," he said, with a deep breath. "But I—

daren't. It'll break that poor kiddie's heart. But it's got to be. It's all for him now. And I daren't take a chance."

"Mary's with him." The light in Father Dan's eyes was eloquent. "She's been with him right through it. She's—mothered him. She'll see his heart doesn't break."

"Bless her!"

"Sure."

Father Dan waited. Larry turned away. It was in the direction of the Point where the wind drifted the smoke of native camp-fires beyond Simon's store. Finally, he turned back urgently.

"Andy—will you keep him for me, Father? He'll be safe with you—and little Mary. There's just one man in the world, I guess, that Simon daren't run foul of. It's you. He hasn't a gunman who'd pull on—you. And it's you, Father. Not your church—or the police."

Father Dan's eyes lit. His lips pursed wryly.

"Andy will be safe," he agreed. Then his hands gestured. "I'll fix the kiddie for you, Larry, boy. You can count on it. I don't know what it is you're trading, and I don't want to. But I'm glad you're cutting out. Mighty glad. I haven't a worry for Andy—now."

A new light was shining in Larry's eyes. Anxiety had passed out of them as he thrust out his disengaged hand. Then, as the two men gripped, he shook his head.

"It was the only way, Father," he said. "I didn't ever let Evie know, either. Nor Andy. And I wouldn't put you wise now if you asked me. That way I've always figured you'd all be safe here in a territory where law's just a word. I never figured Simon had the nerve to jump in on you. But I wasn't taking chances. There's lives too precious in this world to act that way. I'll beat it up to Simon's store right now."

Late as it was, Simon was still awake, still out of his blankets. Nor was it the chance of things. Simon was sitting in his doorway—waiting. And his mask-like face concealed thought that had been feverishly active all day.

But there was nothing about him to betray his mood. In

the gray daylight his face was as blankly grim as were the windowless walls of lateral logs which fronted the old Fort. It was remarkable how he fitted the picture of it all, as, with his gaze turned up-river, he lolled restfully against the doorcasing.

Simon had looked to see the red head of Larry Forsyth on the river and coming his way. He had contemplated a desperate visitation. He had looked for the coming of a crazily furious man thirsting for his blood. And he had been quite ready for him.

Simon's understanding of human nature was peculiar to himself. It had never occurred to him, after having seen Larry pass up the river on his way in from Big Waters, that Father Dan, by any chance, had failed to tell him of the doings he had interrupted at Evie's bedside. He had even hoped that he had told the husband the full story. For Simon had made up his mind to a "show-down" with the man whom he held to be robbing him.

But Simon was puzzled at the delay in the clash he felt to be inevitable. He was puzzled and even aggrieved. Lola had long since gone to her bed. And the loutish Jean had not yet come up from the native encampment where he and Dan Quinlan, and the half-breed, Le Bane, were wont to amuse themselves at night. Here was a day full spent, and half the night, and the furious red-head had not appeared. Why?

Simon sat on, however. And when, at last, Larry did appear, he came leisurely over the bowlder-strewn foreshore, swinging a heavy gun-belt in one hand, the sight of which stirred Simon to wonder.

He took the man in from head to foot and rose from his sitting. And, when Larry halted in front of him, he was largely filling up his doorway.

Larry eyed the trader with provocative derision, and held up the gun-belt. There was no greeting.

"Dutch got in?" he asked, shortly.

"Haven't see him around. Why?"

Larry lifted his broad shoulders. He shook his head.

"No. Guess he wouldn't be," he said. "He's a bum river

man. He's not safe making the swift waters at any time. You ought to stick to Le Bane—up there. I haven't seen better on the river than Le Bane, ever. Then Dutch is a poor line gunman, too. I had to bring these along so he shouldn't hurt himself."

Larry's derision seemed to be wasted on the trader, who just possessed himself of the belt. He watched while Simon felt the weight of it, and looked down at the weapons in the open holsters, and at the clips of ammunition with which the belt was filled. Then he went on, coldly.

"You know, Simon, it's good I'm cutting out of the game —now. If I weren't, there'd be a big killing up there one way and another. And I guess I'd be doing most of it. You see, it's getting wearisome looking over my shoulder all the time for one of your thugs."

"I don't get your kick if you're doin' the killing," Simon retorted, without the flicker of an eyelid. "Why not stop around, and—get after it?"

Larry's clear blue eyes glinted as he looked into those so coldly observing him.

"Get it clear in your mind that I should do the killing—if I stopped around," he said, coldly. "But killing a poor fish with a five-dollar yearning and a five-cent wit to do would be like shooting up a crazy malemute that hasn't sense enough to make a getaway. You made a bad buy in Dutch. And I can't congratulate you on the others. I don't guess they could locate a 'strike' if you showed it to them. And as for a killing? Psha! Three! Gee! Why not pull the game yourself? Why not make Big Waters for a look around? If I thought you'd go along up to Big Waters I'm not sure I wouldn't stop around after I'd made my trade. It would be bully pulling the game with you sitting in. It's no sort of use a stacked deck if you don't handle the cards yourself. Your thugs are an insult to a grown man, and I can't keep awake watching them."

Simon turned away to the far horizon where a hint of sunshine was just creeping through the cloud-wrack.

"You're cutting out, eh?" he mused, in a tone that should have warned.

"Sure. Unless you figure to ——"

"I'm not makin' Big Waters at your bid, boy. When I fancy makin' north it'll be when it suits—me."

Simon's jaws snapped short. And Larry took in the strong profile.

"It's a pity," he replied, in a low tone. "You see, I'm leaving more up there behind me than I'm taking out. Much more. There's millions of dollars of stuff there right now. Likely it's been there a thousand years because folks didn't know. Maybe it'll stop there another thousand if I don't fancy handling it. It's lying in Nature's safe deposit," he went on. "And make no mistake it is a safe deposit, Simon. You can't open it without the right key. Do you know the key? It's 'knowledge.' Your gunmen can't blow open the lock. It just can't be done. Those boys are a waste of good wages."

Simon turned. He turned with such swiftness that Larry knew he had at last penetrated the man's armor.

"Say, you've handed me quite a bunch," he said, his white-ringed eyes sufficiently alive to keep Larry's watching them. "I've given you an attention that looks plenty to me. Now listen while I say some. Guess it's twenty-odd years since my woman an' me scratched our cents, bunched 'em, and hiked to a territory ther' wasn't a soul else crazy enough to want, and where you could only live the sort of life you can in a cold hell with the fire out. We figgered then, an' we figger now, that territory belongs us. An' there's no feller on earth has right to more than a share of the stuff lying around. You need to get it, Father Dan couldn't live here a week but for us. You wouldn't have pulled a cent out of Big Waters but that we'd made it so you could face up to the hell of this country. It's our guts made your play possible. More'n twenty years back we took a gamble with life, and asked only to have our right share in the money lying around. We jumped no claim. Ther' wasn't a darn soul yearning. Now you've jumped in. We were glad enough. We were ready to pass a hand and make things easy. And we figgered to get in if you made good. Just a right share any honest folk would look for."

The man paused. His harsh tone had never once varied. He even seemed incapable of emotion in the manner of his expression. But Larry understood. There was fury behind Simon's eyes, the sort of deadly fury that means so much more than words can express.

"You showed right away there was nothing doing for us," he went on. "You said as plain as acts can show there was goin' to be no partner sharing in. That's all right. I can't say I wouldn't have acted the same. But I wasn't just standing around. And I guess if things had been reversed you wouldn't have stood around neither. You've pulled your stake, an', as you say, the rest's in that safe deposit you can't blow your way into with gunmen. You're goin' to play dog in the manger. But you won't get away with it. Just git a right hunch to that. You won't get away with it."

Simon spat and turned again to the skyline. And Larry's instant retort came as coldly, as unemotionally as the other's argument.

"That's all right, Simon," he said. "You've made quite a swell spiel. And you sound like a she-wolf in Sunday School. But seeing there's millions for the picking up I allow you're liable to feel sore. Say, you didn't look for that share. You didn't wait for it. You just set gunmen on my tail because you *wanted it all.* You can't hand me that sort of psalm with gravy. Once you'd got the key to that safe deposit through me I'd have had the chance of a freezer in hell. You can't get it all ways. I've got away with it under your arsenal of cheap guns, and I'm not worried. The schedule I've planned is clear-marked. I'm hitting Leaping Horse to make a big bunch of trade. The biggest yet. And tomorrow I'm coming along to you to make a buy of truck for my trip. And, believe me, I shall get away with it."

Simon refused to be drawn further. He slowly shook his head at the horizon.

"Guess Lola'll hand you the truck you need, when you need it, all right. That's what we're here for," he said, quietly. "But, as I said, I'm not standing around. And you *won't* get away with it!"

CHAPTER X

SIMON DECIDES

THE mind of Dutch Deazel was a pretty poor thing. It was a sort of expression of outrageous vanity with nothing much else but nerve to support it. He had accepted service with Simon Duchette because he saw in him an obscure trader in a territory sufficiently remote from police interference. Bemused by a fictitious estimate of his own powers as a gunman he had considered that Simon would be an easy "mark." He had visions of "easy money" in the association, as well as a pleasant respite from the strenuous conditions of a gunman's life in a modern, well-policed, gold city.

But he had suffered disillusionment. It had leaped at him almost at his first encounter with the trader. Without being able to tell himself in so many words, Dutch had realized that Simon was that most dangerous of all human creatures —a man whose every act was governed by simple expediency. He had no sense of right or wrong. He was without scruple in anything. Killing? He found that killing was elementary in Simon's philosophy. The man made his, Dutch's, adventures in that direction look like, in his own phraseology, "two cents." And the discovery upset Dutch's vanity. So much so, in fact, that, but that his hiring brought him into contact with some sort of a fabulously rich strike up at Big Waters, he would have gone back to his gold city and risked the consequences.

On the morning following Simon's "show-down" with Larry Forsyth, it was a moody and badly chastened gunman who pulled in from Big Waters. About the only consolation Dutch had available was inspired by the thought that, at least, his nerve had not yet failed him. There was no escape for him. He had got to report to Simon. And all he had to report was—failure. A report which must be made unaccompanied by the guns it was his business to carry.

The man was a smoldering volcano of snarling rage. And it was the sort of rage inspired by fear.

It was heavy enough work beating against the fierce currents where the headwaters of Flood River streamed out of the lake. Dutch made it heavier by reason of his lack of skill. His light craft was flung and buffeted badly, and, in consequence, his mood suffered further. Nor, when he finally ran into smooth water, and the grim Fort with its windowless front came into view, and he drew abreast of the high-poled Indian tepees of the native encampment, did matters improve. The sight of the Fort brought him a vision of a man with cold, dead eyes. And the encampment reminded him of two associates, as desperate as himself, who were not likely to spare him on the subject of his own professional disaster.

But Dutch Deazel's nerve stood. He avoided the crush of kyaks at the landing, ran his canoe up on to the soft silt of the shore, and hurriedly made his way up to Simon's store.

It was a meeting in close privacy. The door of Simon's office-living-room was tight shut, as was the cotton-covered window. There was to be no one to witness.

Dutch was lounging against Simon's desk. It was an attitude of extravagant indifference. The trader was sitting. From behind his desk he gazed with the sort of look that made Dutch feel much as he had done at the time of his first introduction to the penitentiary.

Simon heaved in his chair.

"Spill it," he said, coldly. "What you located?"

"The dope o' stuff he's hauled down with him he figgers'll nigh double his bank roll at Leaping Horse."

Dutch's announcement had been carefully considered with a view to effect. Propped on the corner of the desk, he looked for reaction. He was disappointed. Simon just waited for more.

"He ain't pulled for the gold city yet?" Dutch asked, sharply.

Simon's big head moved negatively.

"His woman died on him two nights back," he said.

"Died?"

The Swede's eyes snapped with a leer. Simon spat into a cuspidor.

"Broke her darn neck or something, fool-diving," he said, callously. "You're wise to the stuff he's hauled?"

The final question was the opportunity for which Dutch was waiting. He snatched at it.

"Hell!" he cried, in a tone he hoped to get away with. "Wher's the use? Say, chief, it's the same like all over agin. I done all you said. I never missed a thing. I was right thro' his darn outfit before he pulled out; I been clear through his camp; I been down that bloody hole he's mined with winch an' tackle, with—with a spy-glass. Ther's not a darn thing. That crazy canoe of his don't hold a thing I ain't handled good, from his louse bag to the rotten driftwood fire feed he carries. An' I tell you right here ther' aint a thing to it I'd buy with a Mexican cent. It's got me hot. It's got me so hot I want to pull on him. I want to see that red head of his lying around down ther'," he cried, pointing at his feet, "an' his bloody grinnin' eyes lookin' right up at things they can't see. I'm sick chasin' a strike your eyes can't locate. Tcha."

Dutch's nerve was serving him well. But, as he looked into the cold face behind the desk, his momentary enthusiasm waned.

"Then how you know?"

Dutch took a grip on himself.

"Wouldn't you know if he said?" he cried, hotly. "Hasn't it always been the same before? He ken lie, I guess. But his bank roll don't lie. He said right out he was haulin' it. Said he was through. Quittin'. Said—he was leavin' more stuff along behind him—millions o' dollars of it—than he could haul in—years! He told me. An' I guess I believe him."

Dutch's eyes were widely round with wonder. They were alight with greed. He was filled with yearning. And he had forgotten his missing guns.

"How came it he—told you?"

Dutch dropped heavily into realities.

"We was talkin', I guess," he snapped, sulkily.

"Sure. Not kissin'!"

Dutch flung up a pair of exasperated fists.

"God A'mighty!" he exploded.

"Quit play-acting, you bum gunman!" Simon's tones

smote frigidly. "I'll tell you. He called your bluff good. He 'saw'—and took your guns off'n you. An' he talked while you just stood around an' listened the way he made you. If you fancy pulling a bluff, try a kid's school. That's your line. That hole Le Bane said he'd mined. Well?"

Dutch again summoned his nerve. His reply came with a snarl as fierce as anything Simon could show him.

"Ain't that wot I was comin' at, you big stiff," he cried, his dark face flushed, his snapping eyes furious. "Sure, I made it. And it was that fool play that handed it to him. I went right down that cursed sump till the seep of water was at my knee-joints. Oh, it's a workin', sure. But what the hell he gets out of it but dirt and water, you can search me. Ther' aint a sign of color. Say, I got to get right after him. I surely have. I'm crazy made for it. I tell you, whatever it is, he's got the stuff. He ain't lyin'. He's got a pile that doubles his bank roll. An' he's got it with him. He told me. An' he wasn't lyin'."

Simon's eyes glinted.

"Yes. He told you," he mused. "And he told me."

The trader stood up. His eyes were alive now, and Dutch liked them even less. It was a movement that brought Simon's big body towering over the other, although the Swede was big enough. For an instant his cold eyes bored. Then he turned abruptly, and moved to a shelf on the wall. When he returned he was carrying the man's missing guns. He held them out and Dutch snatched at them. It was like a mother recovering her lost babe.

Simon's eyes had hell looking out of them.

"That two-cent wit fits him, too," he said, with seeming irrelevance.

"What d'you mean—two-cent wit?" Dutch snarled, as he strapped his guns in place.

Simon bit a fresh chew.

"He guessed you'd a five-dollar yearnin' for a kill, with a two-cent wit to put it over."

Simon dropped into his chair and watched the leap of fury in the other.

"The bloody skunk!" Dutch roared. "He said that? Him?

God A'mighty, I'll show him! He got the drop on me along of that cursed sump you didn't know better than to have me chasin'. He won't ever get that chanct agin. No. Not if he could live a thousand darn year. Two-cent wit, eh? I got! Me! Two-cent! The son of a —— God! I'll drop him on sight! I'll ——!"

"You'll go where you belong an' wallow with the squaws an' Eskimo sluts down at the waterside," Simon said, in the level tones that conveyed so much of the man behind them. "You've made all the fool play I'm standing for. You're through! Fired! But get it good. If you pull on that boy, if you so much as bat an eye at him, you'll never live to see another day. Larry Forsyth's my meat. An' I don't eat with any 'four-flush.' Get out! An' set them guns wher' a babe can't snatch 'em."

Lola Duchette was satisfied to be without a customer in her store. For once she was glad to find herself with spare time on her busy hands.

She was an indefatigable creature where profit was to be made. Her greed was the whole of her. She was fit partner for her man; a creature ready to face up to anything life could show her. Wifehood, motherhood, these things were the incidentals which Nature had imposed on her. They were the bodily claims of sex. The only passion of her life was the money which had been denied her from her earliest childhood. There was nothing she would not do—no trick, or crime she would shrink from—to obtain wealth.

Just now, while she listened to the rumble of voices behind the closed door, she was glad there was no barter to distract her; that the store was empty. She knew that the great stake they were playing for was hovering in the balance, even inclined to swing away from them. And the thought of it was driving her.

It was an eager, anxious glance that flashed from her dark eyes as Dutch, at last, flung out of the inner room and crashed the door behind him. She stared after him as he hurried through the store and out into the open without a glance in her direction. She wanted to speak. But she

refrained. Simon would tell her. That was the way between them. So she waited.

One glance into Simon's face when he emerged from his room reassured her. It was without any expression that anyone but herself could have read. But Lola's mind was attuned. Simon's face was like the pages of an open book to her.

Simon came at once to the counter upon which Lola was leaning. He turned his back to it, and sought the distant view beyond the open doorway. The litter of trade about him was unheeded. He just stood leaning and silently gazing.

Lola became impatient. Her lips tightened and there was a snap in her interrogation.

"Well?" she demanded.

Simon chewed for a moment before replying.

"He's got it all with him," he said, at last. "The biggest dope he's ever pulled out of Big Waters. He said that last night. An' Dutch has told it today. That red-head's just laffin' at the bunch of us."

Lola sucked in a sharp breath. Her eyes narrowed.

"An' Dutch—did he get wise?" she asked. Then: "Psha! No. Not Dutch."

"Dutch wouldn't get wise to hell if you dumped him in it."

"No. But—I'm glad."

"Eh?"

Simon turned. For a moment he stared into the narrowed eyes set in the round face. Then he nodded.

"Sure," he agreed. "He's fired. I'm makin' the next play."

Satisfaction flitted over the woman's face.

"It's the only thing."

"Fix an outfit, kid," Simon went on. "Lay it by in there," he added, jerking his head at the inner room. "Make it for a two-month trip. You can't ever tell."

Lola's gladness had replaced every other expression.

"That's what I bin thinkin' right along," she said, cordially. "It's no sort o' use monkeyin' longer with bum gunmen while he's gettin' away with it. It's fool work standin' around guessin' while he cashes his trade. You want that

trade yourself. And it don't matter you don't know what it is. He's got it on him. Or it's in his outfit. Well? Once we get it we can sit back an' wait till—we get wise to it. Anyway, we'll have it, an' no one can cash it on us."

"Sure, girl. Fix that outfit right, an' handy for a quick getaway. You can leave the rest to me."

CHAPTER XI

LARRY CARRIES ON

SIMON looked after the two figures as they moved away from the Fort, both of them laden with all they could carry in the sacks which were slung over their shoulders. They were sturdily making their way along the rough foreshore to Father Dan's Mission, two red-headed creatures walking hand in hand.

It had been a curt, ungracious transaction. Larry had come to the store unsmiling and word-sparing. And while he ordered, and paid, and received, Andy had stood beside him, silent, and absorbed in childish, troubled thought. There had been no more than the coldest civility between the traders and their customers. Then they had gone. And Simon watched from his doorway, and saw the boy's small hand reach out and clasp that of the father.

The urgent Lola came and peered over her man's shoulder.

"He'll pull out with morning—tomorrow," she said, with decision. "The rest of today'll be for his—kid. Best have your outfit in the kyak tonight."

"Sure."

Simon nodded. Then he looked down at the landing where a hide kyak was up-turned, and tar-smearing was proceeding lavishly.

For awhile the work seemed to interest him. Then he studied the sky. It was a fine weather prospect. A froth of white cloud was billowing up on a light southerly breeze, and he was satisfied.

Later on, as Lola went back to her work in the store, Simon turned again in time to see father and son vanish

around the thrust of wind-swept woods which marked the river bend.

Andy's bodily burden, as he strode bravely beside his one remaining parent, with bare feet indifferent to the stony road, was nothing to that of his boy's troubled heart. Yet both were borne with a will. It was a moment in the youngster's life when all his sturdy spirit was fighting the weakness of his years.

The past two days had yielded hours when no courage could hold back the boy's overwhelming grief. But they were over. Never again would he permit weak, hopeless tears to drench his pillow. The shame of them had come home to him in the mute reproach of Mary's dry, solemn, courageous eyes.

The boy had seen with understanding far beyond his years. And what he had seen hurt the pride of his budding manhood. Mary had risen above her feelings while he had weakly yielded. The sex in him was in frank rebellion. And it did more to help him ride out his storm than could anything else.

But now a fresh blow, that was almost harder to bear, had fallen. His hero father was going at once to Leaping Horse, and he, Andy, was to be left with Father Dan, and Jane Hesther, and Mary, until he returned. But the boy was determined. And he strode manfully along at his father's side bearing his share of the burden with stern resolution.

"Why for can't I go with you, Pop?" he protested, as they passed out of sight of Simon's store.

"Because I'm taking no chances this time, Andy, boy."

The boy turned the matter over in a rebellious mind.

"Chances?" he said. "There'd be two of us that way. I'm swell on the trail," he added. Then, as a clinching argument: "Say, Pop, that way you wouldn't need to get along back here, seeing we're quitting."

Larry kept his gaze ahead. He dared not turn and face the pleading of the boy.

"No, Andy," he persisted. "I'd be glad enough for you to go right along with me. But I can't chance it. Here," he went on, with a sudden, impulsive resolve, "I guess you're

only twelve, but you're all sorts of a man. And I'm going to tell you things I wouldn't tell to a—kid. Since our dear's gone, I guess I got no one but you to tell things to. Do you see? It's to help *me* I'm telling. You see what you mean to me—now?"

The boy's burdens suddenly lightened.

"I get it, Pop. You can tell me. An' I'll do just the way you need."

The father turned now with a tender smile.

"I knew you'd act that way," he said, squeezing the clinging hand. "Now just listen with all those sharp ears of yours. And think hard when I'm through. I'm toting a treasure down with me to Leaping Horse to get safe to the bank. It would set you crazy if you knew how big it was. It's so rich it almost scares me. Now the folks here know about it. Simon, Dutch, and those others, Le Bane and the drunken Irishman, Dan, and maybe that kid, Jean. They've been trailing me all the time we've been here. They'll trail me now, and even when I'm in Leaping Horse. They want it. See, boy? They want to steal it on me. And it's their last chance because we're quitting right after this trip. Now, if you went with me I'd have you to think of as well if it came to a scrap. And it may come to a scrap. Yes, it will, I guess. Alone, I can beat 'em—all. Alone, they don't worry me. They never have. But seeing you're all I have now, boy, I'd be worried and scared for you. That's why I need you to stay right here with Father Dan. I know you'd be swell on the trail, and a mighty big help—ordinarily. But when it comes to scrapping, I want to be alone. When I'm through we'll be rich—so rich. And it's all for you as well as me. You'll stop around as I say—to help me?"

While Larry was talking, the child's eyes had grown big with wonder and excitement. His father was taking him into his confidence. Now he was making him a partner in his secret. He caught a sharp breath.

"It's gold, Pop?" he asked, in an awed whisper.

But Larry shook his head.

"If I told you what it was they might try and make you tell."

"How?"

"They might hurt you. They might threaten to—kill you."

"I wouldn't tell—ever. Not if they was to—kill me."

But the man shook his head.

"No, old man. I wouldn't tell you now for a million dollars. You'll stop around with Mary and Father Dan, and just wait for me to get back. That's the best way you can help me."

Andy's reply came with a sort of gulp.

"Sure I'll—stop around," he said.

"An' you'll do just as Father Dan says—always?"

"Yes, Pop."

"Good man. And then—then we'll go where everything's swell, and fine. And the sun's always shining. I'll quit looking for oil and things. I won't be a mining engineer any more. And I won't have you around living hard any more. We'll just be together—you and me, now—our dear's gone. Eh?"

"Su-ure!"

Larry heard the quavering. Nor did he look around.

Larry Forsyth's long day's work was at last completed. He and Andy had shared it together at the waterside, and at the log home in which they had both known so much happiness, and finally such tragic grief. They had both carried on with a will.

The log building with its low, inclined roof, and its windows of cotton, with its makeshift furnishings, would be a home for neither of them again. With the passing of a beloved wife and mother the light that had made it home had gone out. And with every driven nail, as they secured doors and windows against all but forcible intrusion, it was like the burial of a past they were striving hard to shut out of sight.

Now they were both back at the Mission for the night, with everything prepared for the father's start on the morrow for Leaping Horse. It was to be his last hazard in a man's bid for fortune.

His freshly tarred craft, with its carefully stowed cargo, was lying on the water moored at the Mission landing, and

a night vigil over it would be shared by Oolinak, father, and son.

Larry was squatted on his haunches in the smoke stream of the smudge fire which had been lit before Father Dan's doorway. The old priest was beside him on the up-turned bucket. Both were warding off the savage onslaught of the swarming insects.

Oolinak was already down at the landing watching over his charge, while Andy and Mary were sitting apart on the rocks sharing together the last moments of their day.

Larry nursed his drawn-up knees. He was smoking thoughtfully while his gaze observed every movement down at the water's edge.

"You know, Father," he said, "it's like the last look at daylight to a condemned man, sitting here watching those —two kids. That red-headed bit of flesh an' blood's got to be the sun, moon, and stars of my life. He's sort of the last spar for a man to cling to in a sea that's got no bottom to it anywhere. I can't see life without him—now."

Father Dan removed his pipe, spat, and re-set it in the opposite corner of his mouth. His lean face was unsmiling. The twinkling eyes were thoughtful.

"With the mercy of God, I guess that spar'll keep afloat, boy. There'll be nothing to hurt that kiddie that I can handle. That little girl kid's as a daughter to me. Well, I guess your boy's almost a son, too. You've got my word. Maybe it's all you can get. But it goes. It goes with all that's in me."

The deep note of sincerity was more than a stimulant to the father, who sat staring hungrily through the smoke at the hatless red head.

"Sure," he nodded, unable to express the feelings of the moment.

They sat on in silence for some moments. The hush of the world about them was profound. The long day showed no sign of waning yet, but an atmosphere of night was in the change of tone in the Nature sounds hovering over the river.

At last Larry bestirred. He released his strong hands from about his knees. The slant of the missionary's thought-

ful eyes saw one of them reach under the man's parka. When Larry withdrew it it was grasping a wide, pouched, waterproof money-belt. It was old, well-worn. But its pouches were bulging. He sat for some moments gazing down at it reflectively.

Father Dan cleared his throat.

"You'll beat it first thing—tomorrow?" he said. "You're fixed on it?"

Larry looked up. His freckled face was set. His brilliant blue eyes were hard with the trouble behind them.

Father Dan wondered. Somehow the man's eyes lacked what he could have wished to see in them. He had come to know Larry as only men in the wide, silent places get to know each other. He felt there was something full of omen in the hard, hopeless stare of those eyes which were usually brimful of confidence. Was he weakening? Had the blow that had fallen broken the spirit which had always been so recklessly buoyant?

Larry seemed to read the question in the other's mind. Their eyes met, and he shook his head. And a ghost of his old smile came back for an instant.

"Don't get it wrong, Father," he said. "It's easy to mistake a feller when—when things are on edge. It's all going through the same as if Evie were around. You see, I feel she *is* around, anyway. Somewhere standing by to see I put things through. I want you to have this." And he held out the belt for the other to take.

Father Dan eyed the bulged pouches.

"That's money," he said, without attempting to take it. "I don't want your money, boy."

Again there was a flash of Larry's old smile.

"Sure you don't, Father," he replied, in a low tone. "I haven't ever known you to want anything for yourself—ever. This isn't for you. It's for Andy. Here, take it. Keep it. There's fifty thousand dollars in it. I drew 'em from the bank last winter, when they put it over me with dope. I guessed then I needed to make sure. I was going to leave it right here with Evie—in case —— Say, keep it for Andy till I get back!"

Father Dan considered the belt without any great friend-

liness. Then he reached out and gingerly took possession of it. And as it left his hand Larry sighed his relief.

"It's a long trail to Leaping Horse," he said, and there was no sign of smile in the hard gloom of his eyes now. "And you can't ever tell. That's a trust—for Andy. If I'm not right back here in three months I won't ever get back. Then you'll have that, and—him. You said my boy was like a son to you. Well, maybe you'll raise him that way, and I'll be glad for you to be his father. Will you go further? Sure, I know you will. That's your way. If things go amiss with me that'll help you to send him where he can learn all the stuff I know. It'll help you to see he gets all that's waiting for him down at Leaping Horse, and to pass him into touch with my folks down East, while he's learning. But when he's learned, I want him to come back to you. And then, when he knows it all, I want you to hand him this, and tell him to read what I've written there."

Larry was holding a small, leather-bound Bible. He was holding it in two hands which seemed to fondle it. It was Evie's Bible, and Father Dan recognized it. He looked into the face that was gazing down at the book. He realized the yearning, the hopeless longing, the sight, and touch of the little Bible stirred. And his simple heart went out in sympathy.

After a long pause Larry looked up.

"You don't need to open it, Father," he said. "Just take it, and keep it, and let Andy do the opening when the time comes. As I told you, I don't want you caught up in this thing. But when Andy's a man, with the right knowledge, I want him to have all this book stands for with a father's whole love. And I want him to go right up to Big Waters and grab the wealth I've piled there for him. It's there waiting, and no one else can handle it but the boy with knowledge. And that little book will tell him how. Father, it was God who handed you the care of Mary. Maybe He'll hand you the care of my Andy. You can't ever tell. That hunch I told you of is uglier now. Yes, a deal uglier. But if I get back, why—forget it all."

Larry passed a hand up under his cap, and his fingers groped at the red hair it covered. Then, with a little des-

perate gesture, he held out the book he seemed reluctant to part from.

"Will you? Remember, he's a lone kid, like your Mary. He'll be as lonesome as she was on that Unaga Plateau."

Father Dan stared at the book in his hands. Then he slipped it into the pocket of his rusty black coat and stood up. He turned without a word and passed into the Mission.

When he re-appeared, he kicked the smudge fire together till the smoke rolled up chokingly. Then he sat again. The eyes he turned on Larry shone in their deep setting. He reached out one lean, strong hand, which came to rest on the other's shoulder.

"If things go amiss, Larry," he said, earnestly, "I'll have a son as well as a daughter. I pray God they won't go amiss. But if they do, all one man can do will be done for you, and Evie—and Andy."

Larry stood up. There was no word of thanks. His blue eyes just looked down into the face of the other. Then he turned away abruptly.

"Those kids need to hit the blankets," he muttered.

And he moved off down toward the water.

CHAPTER XII

THE MIST ON THE RIVER

Outwardly, at least, the going of Larry Forsyth was characteristic. There was no display of feeling. There was no hint of the emotions which had been so deeply stirred in his talk with Father Dan over night. He was just the hard, northern trailman, watchful, alert, setting out on the work which had become second nature to him.

He, and Oolinak, and Andy, had made their night's camp at the landing where the laden boat was lying moored. Watch over it had been kept in three reliefs the night long. And when at last the time came for the start in the morning, a gray mist had rolled in off the lake and hung unmoving over the river.

Food was eaten in Jane Hesther's kitchen, and the Eskimo woman had done her best. That that best was no more than

a repetition of every other meal she prepared was nothing much to its detriment. It was satisfying in the matter of appetite, and Larry would probably eat far worse before he shared another meal at Father Dan's Mission.

Andy was silent, and wide-eyed for the father he was so soon to lose. Mary solemnly ate with her big eyes scarcely raised from her food. Father Dan ate sparingly, as was his way. And he and Larry talked casually of the coming journey.

"You should make it before the freeze-up easily," he said, in reply to Larry's doubt of the speed of a water journey as compared with his usual winter trip with dogs. "There's few enough swift waters from here to Silt Lake in the hills. The stream's easy. I've made it often without a worry. After the lake, right down to the Mackenzie you'll shorten the time by a good half. It's a swift stream the other side, and it's good you'll make back here by dogs instead. But you need to watch that lake. It's queer. It can storm in two minutes like a cyclone had hit it. And it's an ugly sump to hit trouble in. Watch the banks. They're a death trap. Mire on them and you'll lie there with your outfit petrified for all time."

Larry nodded.

"I know. Nothing rots in it. Nothing decays. Sort of pickles. I wonder. Guess it's some chemical in the wash-down of glacial deposits. I've hit against that sort of thing in other places. I'll surely pick my weather and get across quick," he added.

"Sure," Father Dan agreed, with a head-shake. "And you'll need to scrape the craft's bottom even though you're only half a day in those waters. It's bad. No Indian'll look at Silt Lake. Yet, in a way, it's safe enough if folks don't act foolish."

"Like Whispering Lake up on Flood River, north," Larry said, glancing at the gray mist beyond the open doorway. "There's something sort of alive to it. It whispers all the time. I've heard it. But I haven't seen the other, the winter thing that scares every Eskimo sick. The ice rips open, they say. It rips open like a giant mouth gaping. And it swallows up any miserable wretch that happens to be crossing it.

Then it shuts again. And, so far as its victim's concerned, why—that's just that. I wish the mist would clear."

He drank his hot, strong tea which had been boiled almost black.

"I ought to've put in a winter on Whispering Lake," he went on, after a moment. Then he shrugged. "But I didn't. If the yarn's true I guess there's some natural explanation. But it wouldn't ever satisfy the bunch of Eskimos." He shrugged.

Mary's big eyes were raised from her plate.

"It's true," she assured, with a little nod of finality. "Oolinak says so."

"Oolinak's an Eskimo," Andy vetoed promptly.

Mary turned to the unsmiling face.

"Oolinak's the best trailman anywhere, 'cep' Uncle Larry and Daddy Dan. He's seen it just the same that Uncle Larry says. An' he's going to take me and show me when I'm bigger. Guess he won't take you—you Andy."

"Won't get a chance," Andy retorted, amiably. "I won't be around after Pop gets back."

Mary's eyes seemed to grow bigger.

"You haven't gone—yet," she said.

It was a child's retort without intended significance. But it had instant effect. Andy's face flushed as scarlet as his hair. Then it as abruptly paled. Larry and Father Dan stared. There was a complete silence that was broken at last by Father Dan pushing back from the rough table.

Larry stood up.

"I'll get going," he said.

A moment later he and Andy were on their way down to the landing.

Now that his watch was over, Oolinak hurried up from the river to release his trail dogs from their night quarters. Mary went out, to be instantly surrounded by the great brutes clamoring for her favors.

Father Dan waited. He busied himself in his living room until he saw Larry take his place in the boat at the landing, and saw Andy loosing the rawhide mooring. Then he hurried to the water's edge.

Larry looked up. He held out a powerful hand. As Father

Dan stooped and gripped it he saw something of the old smile in the clear blue eyes looking up into his.

"So long," Larry cried. "And—thanks."

"So long, boy. Watch Silt Lake!"

Larry nodded and sought the face of his son. He strove hard to keep the smile he had had for Father Dan. But it died out at the sight of the ominous down-drooping of the corners of the boy's mouth. He held up a hand with three fingers extended.

"Only three months, old man," he smiled again.

Andy straightened up. He dropped the rawhide mooring into the canoe, and stood, a tall, lithe, troubled but courageous figure.

"So long, Pop," he cried, without a tremor, and raised a hand in farewell.

Then the paddle dipped, and the craft slid away into the stream and became no more than a ghostly shadow in the morning mist.

The two remained on the landing while the canoe was within view. Then Father Dan turned and flung a friendly, protecting arm about the boy's shoulders.

But Andy was in no mood for sympathy. He stiffened under the kindly gesture and looked squarely up into the lean face beside him.

"I'm glad Pop's gone," he said, desperately. "They won't ever get him. He's—he's wonnerful on the river —— He's ——"

It was a sudden wild commotion that interrupted. And it had broken out somewhere at the back of the hut. It was Jane Hesther in a frenzy of screaming protest.

Father Dan hurried. Andy ran. And around the angle of the building they discovered a vision that helped the boy to forget some of his troubles, and set the missionary's keen eyes twinkling.

Jane Hesther's fat body was helplessly sprawled on its back in the trough of hot soapy water that was her wash-tub. Her head was lolling over one end of it. And a pair of the hugest calves and the broadest feet were violently kicking out of the other. She was only partially submerged because the trough was incapable of holding all of her. But

she was held there helpless by the dog, Benjie, standing with all his four feet on the dome of her huge stomach, slobbering her angry face with a friendly tongue.

Mary was literally dancing with glee and encouraging her beloved dog in his blandishments.

The missionary's arrival on the scene synchronized with the converging of Oolinak upon the same objective. There was a yelp of dismay, and Benjie was literally hurled from his solid vantage ground. Father Dan seized a brown, helplessly waving hand and Jane Hesther was hauled from her liquid couch, and safely balanced once more on her sturdy feet.

Then she told the world! She seemed to start from the very beginning, and it looked as though no life could hope to be long enough in which to reach the end. So far as Father Dan could make out, the loss of good hot soap and water would remain the woman's lifelong, passionate regret. Her saturated condition, Benjie's untimely but affectionate display seemed to disturb her not at all.

Jane Hesther was Jane Hesther. And in the midst of her oratorical exercise—which the world had already failed to appreciate—she discovered Oolinak with a heavy rawhide quirt in one hand and Benjie gripped in the other. She turned on her man like a fury unleashed.

"You'm rawhide him, Benjie!" she cried, slashing at him and snatching the whip from the upraised hand, and leaving a trail of steaming water behind her. "I rawhide you'm you Eskimo, no dam good fool man. Him good feller, Benjie. Not so as dam fool Oolinak. Ugh! I lak 'em dis Benjie." And she fondled the dog's great head. Benjie nuzzled her saturated clothing with a display of affection, and generously applied a moist, hot tongue.

Father Dan turned to Mary.

"Why did you let him act that way?" he asked, with pretended severity. "Why didn't you help Jane Hesther instead of—laughing at her?"

Mary knew nothing of subterfuge. She looked up with frankly truthful eyes.

"I didn't let him, Daddy Dan," she said, simply. Then she began to chuckle. "But I—I just had to laff. I——"

"It's no her'm Mar-ee. Not. Never. No." Jane Hesther hurled herself to champion her adored "Mar-ee." She grinned up into the missionary's censorious face. "On'y dam fool Jane Hesther. Her'm stan' by him watter. Her'm not tink never. Not." Her eyes rolled, and her grin broadened. "Her'm mak plenty wash wi' watter an' soap hot lak hell. Her'm say Benjie good feller, bimeby eat plenty. An' Benjie all say mush tank very quick. Him jump lak eberyting. So. Jane Hesther go all sh-wa-s-sh! Him watter hot lak hell. Her'm all fall up no good. Not." She gazed regretfully down at the almost empty trough. "No more plenty watter hot lak hell. Not."

Father Dan's eyes betrayed him, but he turned severely on Mary.

"You'll have to learn half a chapter," he said. "You should have helped. Not laughed. I can't let that pass."

Mary accepted the mild punishment without protest. "Daddy" Dan's severity had no terrors for her. But as she was led off to the Mission House to have her task set she contrived a grimace at Andy, who had been a completely silent witness of her discomfiture.

Mary only remained in the Mission House reading her half chapter until the foregathering of Father Dan's dusky pupils for their morning service. Then she tucked her Bible under one scrawny arm and set off to join her playmate.

But Andy was not to be found. Mary consulted Jane Hesther at her wash-tub. It was useless. The Eskimo launched into a torrent of smiling reference to her morning's ducking, but afforded no help whatever. Mary sought Oolinak. He looked up from his work of renewing the rawhide covering of the runners of a sled and became helpful at once.

"Us see 'm," he assured her, with a broad grin. "Us see 'm head all lak so as a fire. Yes." He bared two even rows of perfect teeth. "It all go up him river. So." And he pointed along the shore.

Mary waited for no more. She was off like the wind, with Bible under arm, and Benjie loping at her flying bare heels. She knew now. Of course. She should have known at once—the old abandoned home. It was her child's instinct that

prompted her, nothing more. She simply told herself that Andy had gone there.

As they came to the house Mary searched for a sign of her playmate. There was none. Only the deathlike stillness which the mist intensified. It seemed to suggest that the place had remained completely undisturbed since father and son had so laboriously secured it against intrusion.

Mary gazed up at a boarded window beside which she had come to a halt. The omen of those crude shutters affected her. She moved away. She passed right around the whole building. No, there was no Andy. And she felt sure there never had been any Andy there. For a moment she was uncertain and stood considering, a slight sun-browned figure in her brief, sleeveless cotton frock, peering out into the mist of the river. Then she started. And she clutched the dog at her side.

It was a sound on the river. And it was curiously muffled in the mist. The dog's ears were pricked and twitching, and the green of its eyes was directed down-river toward the lake. The brute strained at the child's hold, and emitted low warning snarls. Then its agitation increased, and it flung a quick upward look of entreaty at its mistress.

Mary held fast to the dog and remained listening. The sounds came with familiar regularity and she recognized them. It was the dip of a paddle and the boat was speeding rapidly.

Instantly a gleam of mischief shone in the child's big eyes. She knew now. It was Andy in one of the Mission kyaks. Without a moment's hesitation she dragged the dog with her to a place of concealment behind one of the water barrels at the angle of the building.

She made the dog lie down, and herself crouched beside it. Together the two heads peered out upon the mist-shrouded river. Mary was intent on giving her playmate the shock of his life.

The mist on the river was beginning to roll up under a keen breath of drifting air. It billowed, turning over like clouds of thin gray steam. Then, quite suddenly, it was swept aside and a gleam of sunshine fell on the surface of the water.

In that moment the source of the sounds was revealed. It was a canoe, driving furiously against the sluggish stream. It was near into the hither shore, and it was being driven by hands that were powerful and skillful. It was not Andy in a Mission kyak. The speeding boat was being driven by—Simon Duchette.

Mary was more than startled. She was bitterly disappointed. And Benjie, in his agitation, nearly broke from her restraining hold. The girl had looked for Andy and found—Simon! Simon, driving up the river as though he were in a hurry. And he was staring straight ahead of him with those eyes that always made her think of a dead fish.

But Mary had had enough. Her plans had gone awry. Andy was not there. So she snatched up her Bible and leaped to her feet. At that instant Benjie leaped in a surge of snarling fury as though shot from his place beside her.

The child had a vision of the youth, Jean. She saw him for one brief instant standing leering at her. Then there was nothing but a mass of dog and boy as the two went down together.

Mary never hesitated. There was a thin cordwood stick beside the barrel. She grabbed it as the boy's yell of terror broke. And with Bible in one hand and stick in the other, she went to the rescue in no uncertain fashion.

She beat the dog without mercy. Bible and stick were used indiscriminately. They fell on head, and shoulders, and back, and flank. And each blow was with all the no little strength of her young body.

She hated Jean. But she had no intention that his death should be laid at Benjie's door. And, in moments only, the worrying fangs released their hold on the boy's forearm, and the lusting savage was hauled off. She dragged the dog clear and held with all her might.

"Run!" she shrilled, as the raging beast fought frantically in her straining arms. "Run for it, Jean, or he'll kill you! The river! Quick! Swim!" she screamed. "I can't hold! You fool boy! Run!"

And Jean ran. He was on his feet and away at speed. At the water's edge he turned and raised one badly savaged arm. His fist bludgeoned malevolently in the dog's direction.

"I'll sure shoot him on sight!" he cried, and dived into the river.

The breathless Mary hung on to her dog. She fought the brute with a tenacity as savage as its own. And only when she saw Jean swimming well out in the stream did she abandon the struggle. On the instant Benjie charged down the shore.

But Jean was safe. Benjie refused the water. Mary watched him unperturbed as he raced up and down the bank snarling with thwarted fury.

Then, at last, the dog returned to her and Mary chuckled. It was an impish, joyous chuckle of keen enjoyment. She patted and fondled the great head with its slavering jaws. There was no admonishing, not a word—just caresses, which quickly soothed the beast's savage temper.

Then the child picked up what remained of her Bible, leaped to her feet and set off in a fresh direction. She must find Andy and tell him the story of it all. Now her instinct guided her to the little cemetery in the woods at the back of the Mission.

CHAPTER XIII

AT BEDTIME

With daylight still streaming in through the open door, the northern world was nevertheless deep in the hush of night. The only sounds that came to Father Dan as he sat at his little writing-table were the mournful sighing of an uneasy wind in the tortured tree-tops of the woods which sheltered his Mission, the seductive murmur that came up from the lazy river, and the hushed tones of children's voices beyond the door of Mary's sleeping quarters.

Father Dan had been writing diligently for more than an hour. Now he laid his pen aside, corked his precious inkpot, and considered the result of his labors. It was a full page of his diary. And it was closely written in a neat, small hand.

He read what he had written carefully. He wanted to be sure nothing had been missed out that could be accounted

of the least importance. For, somehow, he felt that a full record of all that concerned Larry Forsyth might be very necessary.

Yes. Everything had been set down, and he closed the book, rose from his stool, and replaced the diary in the open chest that had been pulled out from under his bunk. He returned it to its place and came back to his table.

He stood for a moment gazing down at the small Bible, that had once been Evie's. It must be put away in the safest possible place. But where?

For a moment he considered the chest where he kept his diary. But he negatived the idea. A locked chest would be a naked hiding-place. Those seeking Larry's secret would break open every lock on sight. No. The surest hiding was to avoid any secret place.

His eyes twinkled. His bookshelves. There were other Bibles there. He would set this among them, and he felt that no gunman, no one from Simon's store, would concern himself with a Catholic missionary's Bibles.

He picked up the leather-bound volume and passed over to his shelves. And a moment later he stood back from them and considered the addition to his library. It was splendidly insignificant. It was so small and narrow that it was lost among the crowd on the shelves.

He sighed and turned away. Then, pausing, he listened to the low murmur of the children's voices. He had almost forgotten Mary's punishment. She was in bed, staying awake, waiting for him to hear her half chapter.

He closed the outer door and secured it. Then he crossed to Mary's room.

Mary was sitting up in her blankets on the canvas stretcher, which was a concession to her sex and childhood in the way of a bed cot. Her stout pillow was up-ended between her back and the rough wall. Her knees were drawn up under the worn blanket. And on them was propped the battered remains of her Bible.

It was open at a badly torn page. And her big eyes were full of that smile so characteristic of them as she strove to read the mutilated words.

It was a quaint picture. The child's fair hair was screwed up in an untidy knot on the top of her head, and tied in place there with a piece of somewhat discolored tape. Her slight body was enveloped in a night garment. It had sleeves that buttoned at the wrists, and it fastened with a button about her throat. As she gazed helplessly at the tattered page of her book, she was talking to the boy who was on the other side of the blanket that partitioned the little room.

"You better, Andy," she warned. "You won't ever learn to mush the dogs if you don't have me an' Oolinak show you. Ther's two months to the freeze-up. And three till your Pop gets along back. We start tomorrow. And we run every day till freeze-up, so the dogs get hard."

"I guess I won't, though," came from the other side of the blanket. "I don't want to mush rotten dogs. I—I don't want anything."

Mary turned to the blanket. She heard a faint choking sound beyond it, and her own pretty mouth went down at the corners.

But the moment passed. Again her eyes lit.

"You won't be able to help your Pop when he gets back if you don't learn to mush the winter trail. Say, think! You'll be able to mush his team down to Leaping Horse! So it's easy for him. How d'you pronouce E-z-e—then ther's letters all missing. An' it ends with e-l."

"I dunno. How can I pronounce it with letters missing? You're foolish. Say, would I learn to mush in three months?"

"Sure you would—if Oolinak and me showed you. I know. It's 'Ezekiel.' That's it. He's a prophet or sompin'. Why did they get funny names? Now 'Andy's' a heap better name than 'E—Ezek'l.' Maybe those old folks didn't know about 'Andy' though."

"They wasn't Scotch."

"No. I guess they lived in tents and things. And they—they made calves out o' gold. The Scotch folks don't make their calves out o' gold. They're kind of ordinary, aren't they? Say, will you take me to Scotland some time? I mean when we get married, and we got heaps and heaps of dollars like your Pop?"

"I guess I won't be able to marry you now. I'm goin' away when—Pop gets along back."

"Oh! Then I won't show you how to mush the dogs. We're goin' to break Benjie to lead. He's old enough now. He'll be twelve months come freeze-up. He'll be a swell leader. He'll run miles and miles. And he'll never tire. And he always 'members. That's why he can't stand for Jean. He hates Jean," with a chuckle. "You must have a dog who 'members for lead."

"I don't care if you won't show me. Oolinak will. I'll fix it with him tomorrow!"

"Then you will come? My, but this page is all names an' things. An' I can't ever 'member names. Oh, dear!"

"H'sh!"

"What is it?"

"It's Uncle Dan. Guess he's goin' to hear your haf chapter."

"But I——"

Father Dan pushed open the door, and smiled down at the little gray-clad figure sitting up in its bed. Mary's big eyes were blandly smiling up at him. And forthwith came frank, downright admission.

"I don't know it, Daddy Dan, dear," she cried. "I tried. 'Deed I did! But it's all funny names and things. And—and the page is torn—and—and it's dreffful hard, and I don't know it."

The smile remained in Father Dan's eyes though he struggled for the severity suitable to the occasion. He sat himself on the end of Mary's stretcher, and, as he did so, wondered how many children would so frankly have avowed their failure, when it was a punishment.

"You don't know it?" he said, and held out his hand for the tattered Bible.

Mary saw the smile die out of his eyes, and the shaggy brows draw together in an ominous frown as he considered the torn volume with its binding broken away.

He looked up. And now his face was really stern.

"Why?" he asked, sharply.

Then he sat there listening, startled and wondering at this child of eleven.

"Yes," Mary said at once. "It's all tore. And—and I did it. I just had to if Jean wasn't to be killed dead. I had that, and I had a club. And I used both till Benjie quit, and I got him away, and made Jean jump into the river wher' Benjie wouldn't foller him, 'cos he hates water worse than he hates Jean."

Mary paused a little breathlessly. She was not afraid, but she knew her beloved "Daddy Dan" could be very, very stern on occasion. She hated to grieve him. Father Dan laid the book down on the blanket.

"Now start at the beginning and tell me," he said. "Just tell me why, and when, and what made Benjie try to kill Jean?"

Mary obeyed with amazing literalness. There was no pretense, no excuse. She just told how she had left the Mission House when the folks began to gather, and went in search of Andy, taking her Bible with her, intending to learn her imposition; how she could not find Andy, and went up the river to the old home thinking he might be there; how he was not there; and how, while she searched, she saw Simon racing up-stream in his kyak very fast, just as the fog cleared.

Father Dan was startled.

"You saw Simon going up-river?" he asked, sharply. "You're sure it was Simon?"

Mary nodded.

"Sure," she said. "I guess he was going out after geese and things. He'd got his rifle. The one he always takes when he's out after game. Its barrel was sticking up out of the kyak. He went quick. But it was Simon."

Father Dan nodded. He suddenly bethought him of the boy beyond the partition. And, without hesitation, he lied.

"Yes, he said he was going," he said. "There are moose in the woods up in the hills. I'd forgotten. Go on."

"It was when I was looking at Simon," she continued, "that Benjie sprang. He'd been lying down beside me. It was Jean. He'd come up all quiet, and I just saw him. And Benjie jumped. He got the fool boy by the arm and tore it open so it bled like anything. And I couldn't help it. I'd only the Bible, and a stick that was lying there. And I beat

him and beat him till he let go, and I told Jean to run for the river. I held Benjie in both arms, and Jean got away. Say, Daddy, dear," she finished up, with her irrepressible chuckle, "you never saw a fish swim so quick in the water as Jean did. I—I had to laff!"

But the infection of Mary's laugh was without its usual effect. Father Dan stood up.

"That dog'll get you into trouble, child," he warned. "Jane Hesther this morning, and now Jean. You should have told me at once, and I'd have dressed the boy's arm. A dog's bite's bad. Even your Benjie's. Now go to sleep. And tomorrow I'll see Jean."

Mary dropped her pillow into its place, and slid down in her blankets. Father Dan bent over and kissed her on the forehead. And as he did so a pair of strong young arms reached up about his neck and hugged him, and a pair of ardent young lips responded to his caress.

A moment later the door closed behind him, and he crossed over to his bunk. He sat down on it and stared thoughtfully across at the doorway through which he had just passed.

So Simon Duchette had gone up the river, in—a hurry.

CHAPTER XIV

FATHER DAN GIRDS UP HIS LOINS

THE Arctic night of winter had long since descended upon the northern world. Now it was a world of twilit desolation frozen to the bone; a playground set ready for the storming of the elements. But at the moment it was still with a profound calm, and a cold that was many degrees below zero.

Snow was everywhere. The vast sea of Lake Whitewater was a frozen mass. Hope River was solid to its bed. And over all was the cold, starry sheen of a cloudless sky, whose northern dome was brilliant with the stabbing lights of a glory of aurora.

Father Dan was standing in his open doorway. His big body was silhouetted against the light of the room behind him. He was gazing out on the dim world wholly indifferent

to the cold streaming into the room, and nullifying the feeble efforts of a wood fire to raise the temperature.

But, then, fire, to him, was something of a luxury. Like the hardy creatures in whose service he labored, he looked for bodily warmth to his fur-lined parka, his walrus snow-boots, his fur cap, and his mitts that reached above his elbows.

As he stood there, sounds of life came to him from within the building. There were the children's voices. There was the voice of Jane Hesther complaining. There were the guttural tones of Oolinak that were almost musical. But he gave none of them heed. He was deep in a final review of the thing he had planned, had prepared for, and which, with the mercy of a kindly Providence to help him, he intended to carry out without a further moment of unnecessary delay.

Within twenty-four hours he and the boy, Andy, were to set out south on a long winter trail with two Indian dog teams, and the two most reliable Indian scouts whose services he had been able to purchase. And, in less than three months' time, he expected to reach the railhead at far Athaba.

The man was troubled with no doubts on the subject of the journey itself. He knew the winter trail by heart. For years it had been as much his daily life as had been the swift waters of summer. It was only in deference to his responsibility for Andy's welfare that he had dipped into the money left in his trust for the elaborateness of the outfit he had decided to take. No, the terrors of that grim journey were the least of his concern.

His trouble now was the rightness of the thing he was about to do. And so he was reviewing the position in which he found himself by the light of the cold reason of circumstance which set aside all personal feeling. The instructions he had received from Larry Forsyth had been clear-cut, and allowed of no alternative interpretation. Yet, he felt, even at this eleventh hour, he must convince himself. What was the position?

Everything was dependent on the failure of Larry to return from Leaping Horse within the three months he had allowed himself. He had failed to return. Now he was

three weeks overdue, and still there was no sign nor word of his return.

That, in itself, was sufficient warrant for Father Dan to take action. But there was more than that. Mary had told of Simon Duchette's hurried journey, hard on the heels of Larry, and under cover of the morning mist. It had been definitely a pursuit of Larry—a secret pursuit. In Father Dan's view there could be no doubt of that. And Simon out on a man-hunt was a very different proposition from the pursuit of the men he had hitherto hired. And Simon, too, had failed to return!

If the missionary had had any doubts about giving Larry any further margin of time before he acted, the fact of Simon's failure to return had convinced him of the uselessness of it. It was no use waiting and hoping. It was no use blinding himself to realities. He understood the human nature of the thing, the human wickedness. Larry had failed to return. Simon had failed to return. So there was disaster. And, he felt, that that disaster, whatever its nature, had been humanly wrought.

But there was other evidence which he had been swift to realize. There had been the effect of Simon's absence upon those belonging to him—Lola's disquiet, her sheer alarm at her man's prolonged absence. For many weeks, now, there had been continuous scouting all up and down the river, before the freeze-up and since. These things had come to Father Dan through the native sources at his command.

Why? Lola had been paying heavily for the work. And when Lola Duchette paid heavily for Indian scouting, the urgency must be very great indeed. Father Dan had watched her closely. Outwardly she had just carried on the work of her store with no apparent concern for anything but her trade. But the harassed look in her dark eyes, the ominous lining of her comely face, had warned. Then there had been a furtive searching whenever her gaze was turned up-river.

Another matter that had impressed its significance was Simon's having rid himself, before he went, of the men he had so long employed in his efforts to discover the secret of Larry's treasure. He had paid them all off without making any secret of it. Two had hurriedly left in a race against

the seasons. But not so the Swede, Dutch Deazel had remained. And after awhile he and the boy, Jean, had been seen working together on the hue and cry which Lola had instituted up and down the river.

It was all obvious. Paid off by Simon, Dutch had been re-engaged by the woman, who was at her wit's end at the continued absence of her man.

Then Father Dan had visited the store and made open inquiries. He had seen no purpose in refraining. As missionary it was almost part of his duty. And the result had been more than enlightening. Lola had met his inquiry as to when she expected Simon's return with cold negation. Then she betrayed herself by assuring him that Simon's comings and goings were no one's concern, not even hers.

His next effort had been with Dutch Deazel and the boy, Jean, when he encountered them returning from one of their trips. Again he received scant courtesy. Jean had maintained a surly silence; the Swede had coolly laughed in his face. He had been confronted with a conspiracy of complete silence.

When the fall train of Simon's winter supplies appeared on the river, Father Dan made a further attempt. It was a small convoy of broad-beamed oomiaks in the charge of the half-breed, Pierre Baudi, from Fort Good Hope on the Mackenzie, and some river Indians. He had asked Pierre if he had met Larry on the river, or seen him in Good Hope. And here he had encountered no conspiracy of silence.

No, the man had seen nothing of Larry. He had met Indians. He had seen Dutch and Jean. Larry? Of course he knew him. Anyone would know his red head a mile away. But he wasn't on the river. And he hadn't been through Good Hope since his trip last winter. Why? What was amiss?

Then Pierre had slanted a knowing glance.

He was wondering, he had said, because he'd had just the same questions from Lola Duchette about her man, Simon.

Everything pointed in the one ominous direction. There had been nothing in all the past months to afford Father Dan any comfort or hope. On the contrary.

So there had been no alternative but to fulfill his given

pledge in the best and quickest way he knew. That pledge must be honored in the spirit as well as the letter. He would spare nothing, and, least of all, himself. His position was crystal-clear. Honor, friendship, even humanity demanded that Andy reach his father's folks at the earliest moment, and obtain the education his father had desired for him.

Finally, his thought flung back to that night with the children, which had called for the exercise of every ounce of courage he possessed. They had been crowding about the blazing hearth fire listening to the howl of a driving storm as the wind shrieked around the sturdy angles of the Mission, and piled the snowdrifts to the height of the roof.

Mary's lean body had been squatted on an up-turned box. She had been hunched in her thick, coarse, winter frock, with her bare knees hugged in her arms. He, himself, had been balanced on his stout, three-legged stool, and Andy had been on the other side of him, squatting, Indian fashion, on the ground. It was their time for bed, that moment of peaceful fire-worship which is so much the habit of the northern man.

It was a poignant memory. He had deliberately chosen that moment for the telling of that which he knew would well-nigh shatter the heart of a child he had come to love like his own son.

Father Dan sighed.

Oh, yes, he had gone through with his task. He had done his best to spare the boy, but he had been unable to spare himself. He had told Andy everything his father had said, and made him promise. He had even told the boy of the little Bible which contained his father's secret, which must wait for the time when he had sufficient knowledge to interpret it.

While the storm outside raged in all its fury he had spoken gently, striving with all the humanity in him to ease the hurt he knew he was inflicting. But he had shirked nothing. It had been the moment for sheer truth without subterfuge, and he had yielded to it.

And Andy had listened in complete silence. There had been no sign in the child beyond the clinging of his hands about his knees, which were gripping as though his very

life depended on their hold. He had sat quite still, staring straight into the crackling blaze of the fire. Mary, too. Not for a single instant had she permitted her yearning gaze to turn in the direction of her playmate.

But at the end of it all, when Father Dan had warned the boy that they were setting out on the trail almost at once, that he was to leave the northern world for school and his father's folks down East, Andy had looked around with vivid blue eyes which came to rest on the crouched figure of Mary. And, as if by some process of mental telepathy, Mary had turned to him on the instant. As she did so, she nodded. It was just the slightest inclination of her tousled head, a mute gesture of approval, backed by a remnant of the queer little smile always lurking in the depths of her big eyes. Then, without a word, she had turned again to the fire. Then Andy had spoken for the first time. His voice had been low, but steady.

"When us start, Uncle Dan?" he had asked.

That was all. Fatherless, motherless, every hope and longing of a child's heart crushed by two overwhelming, successive blows, yet not one word of complaint—not a whimper.

It had been a moment of such emotion as Father Dan had never before known. In the stress of it he had thrust out a hand to each child. And, as they both clung to him, he had told them.

"You're brave kiddies—both of you. And I don't know which I love the most."

Yes, he felt now his rightness was beyond any question. There was nothing for him but to go right ahead as he had planned. For the time, his life's work must be laid aside, while he fulfilled the pledge he had given.

He would go at once to Lola at the store and arrange for the supplies he needed.

Lola's store was littered with newly stocked goods. Her shelves were full, and there were bales and chests lining the old log walls. Then, in her storehouses outside, there were more secret goods that would find no place on her shelves.

There was little enough trade now that winter had shut down, and such as there was was wholly confined to the food

needs of the women and children now housed in the snow igloos which had replaced the summer tepees. Every man of the shore encampment was out on the winter fur trail. Nor would they return till the break of spring.

Lola was at work on her supplies. She was busy. She was busier than the necessities of the moment seemed to warrant. She had months of winter ahead in which to deal with her stores. But she was restless, and her work was a sort of self-defense. She found it the only means of relieving her mind of the constant worry of uncertainty which Simon's continued absence caused her. She had reached that acute stage of apprehension when she worked feverishly all day, and, at night, lay awake working out further plans for a broadcast search which now seemed to be the only thing left to her.

The wear of it all was there in her round face, which was lined and drawn. Her eyes were feverishly bright. Something of her natural plumpness seemed to have fallen away. Her worry had affected her physically as well as mentally.

She was dealing with a bale of highly colored blankets. She had just ripped open the containing cover, and was considering them. And in the midst of her survey she started and looked around at the sound of the slam of the outer storm door of the store. It was followed at once by the opening of the inner door. Dutch Deazel pushed his way in, followed by the fur-clad figure of her son.

There was no verbal greeting. These two had just pulled in from the trail over the ice-bound river to Fort Good Hope. They were late, and she had been concerned. But she gave no indication of any relief. She just eyed them in the light of the swinging lamp as they cleared the ice from about their mouths and furs, and then pressed forward to the great wood-stove that was radiating a fierce heat in one corner of the store.

"Well?" she demanded, at last, leaving the blankets and crossing to the stove. "You got any word? He passed through Good Hope? You seen him? An' did you get the fresh team o' dogs?"

Lola gave no heed to the boy who was standing gazing at her from across the stove. She addressed herself to Dutch.

News. At that moment she cared nothing for anything or anybody. She wanted only news. Her cheeks blanched as she watched the negative movement of the Swede's head.

"Not a darn word. Not a whisper," he said, and his tone was without commiseration. "He ain't never hit Good Hope. Nor that son-of-a-sorrel-mule, Forsyth. They never made the Mackenzie, neither of 'em. If they're anywhere's out o' hell, it'll be this side of Good Hope. I handed two thousand bucks to Pete McAuliffe for his team, an' got no change. Ther's five darn malemutes to it, an' a swell lead dog. They're outside with the others, and'll haul us good till spring breaks. That seem good?"

Lola nodded. But her reply came shrilly.

"It's plumb crazy," she cried, her feelings a-riot. "I tell you you're wrong! Ther' ain't a thing from here to Mackenzie Simon don't know better than his prayers. Ther' ain't a thing to hold him on the way. He's made it, and gone through. They both have—likely. The folks have fooled you!"

She was talking and denying to save herself. And Dutch eyed her. As he did so her comeliness was a sudden realization to the man. He thought of her as a woman, and he thought of the store and the trade. And, suddenly, his manner became ponderously gentle.

"I'm kind of sorry, missis," he said. "You got to look this thing square. Your man ain't made the Mackenzie. That's all. I'll stand my oath for that."

Lola gestured, and the man realized her sudden weakness.

"Then wher' is he?" she cried, helplessly.

Dutch shook his head ominously, and Jean spoke for the first time.

"Dutch is right, Maw," he said, without emotion. "Ther' wasn't a feller in Good Hope set eyes on either. What's the use? He was out after Forsyth. You said so. Well, neither made through. We just got to wait around till the snow goes."

"You mean ——?"

The question got no further. The boy looked down at the stove with his hands outheld to it. Dutch was registering pleasant thoughts as he watched the woman. Suddenly her

dark eyes flashed, and the shrill of Lola's voice was vicious. She had turned on Jean like a fury.

"You're his son! You! My son!" she cried. "An' you stand around guessin' we got to wait till the snow goes! You reckon he's got done up! An' you reckon that way without a worry. You! I tell you no fool Cheechako could do up the man that made you. If you think that way, you ain't fit to be his son. He's around. I pay Dutch good. But you'll get right out after a father who didn't know better than to breed you. Get that, you! There's months to the spring break, an' you'll quit the folk on the shore, an' use 'em all."

The goad had effect. The cold, expressionless face of the boy, so like his father's, was flung up at her.

"You don't need to hand me that, Maw!" he cried. "I'm a kid. But I got guts! I guess what the river'll show, we'll find, if I don't sleep from now till the snow goes."

The mother's eyes softened.

"See an' do it, boy," she said, with a sigh. Then she added: "Ther's big stuff back of this. An' we can't handle it without your father. An' I want him—anyway."

"Sure, Maw. I ——"

But the boy silenced under a warning gesture of Dutch's raised hand. And they all three stood listening.

It was again the outer door. Then there came the shuffle of feet. A moment later the inner door opened to admit Father Dan.

Father Dan gazed swiftly over the scene under the yellow light of the swinging lamp, and his stern eyes came to rest on the face of the gunman.

"Those dogs outside yours?" he asked, with cold severity. "They're sprawled in the snow tuckered right out. It's thirty below, and they're all in. You ought to be ashamed standing over that stove."

The Swede's eyes lit. He opened his ugly mouth to reply. But Lola checked his hot retort. She pointed at the door.

"Beat it, an' see to 'em! Both of you," she cried. "The Father's dead right. Fix the dogs good. An' if they get amiss you'll hear from Simon."

Lola watched them go. Then she turned back to her blankets.

The whole thing was acting for the benefit of the newcomer. Lola lifted an armful of blankets and carried them to her shelves. Father Dan came to the rough counter and stood against it.

"We got to talk, ma'am," he said, regarding her steadily. "And whether you fancy to or not Simon's not back from his trip. Larry's not back from his. Larry should have been back weeks. And, in consequence, so should Simon."

"In consequence?"

Lola had approached the counter on the far side, and leaned on it with her arms folded.

"That's so, ma'am," Father Dan was uncompromising. "It'll save beating around if I state my talk plainly. Larry went down to Leaping Horse with a big bunch of his trade, whatever it is. Simon's always had that Swede, or one of the others, follow him. This time he went right after Larry himself, with his kyak, his guns, his rifle. Larry's overdue. Why? Simon's overdue. Why? You've had folks chasing for him weeks."

Lola shook her head slowly from side to side.

"Sounds like you reckon Simon was out on a hold-up, Father," she said, calmly. "You best come again. Simon was after caribou. There'd been a big bunch of them reported up in the Silt Lake hills when Simon pulled out. Simon wouldn't miss a caribou trail for all the trade in the north. Whatever you figger for that red-headed guy, you can cut Simon out of your worry. He'll be along back when it suits him."

"Does Simon trail caribou under the aurora light? Does he pack the trail after game that's pastime with a blizzard blinding him? Does he roam those big hills with the cold away below zero?"

Father Dan shook his head, and his eyes were hard.

"Ma'am," he went on, "that's the stuff you can hand to kiddies. Not folk who know the trail and know—Simon. But, as for Larry, Larry quit here nearly four months back with Simon close on his trail. Larry's not come through. He hasn't made Fort Good Hope. And he hasn't got back to

the boy that's waiting for him. I've got to know why. So has his boy. It looks like we need the—police."

"The—police?"

Father Dan's shot had gone home. The woman stared, and the sudden flash of alarm in her eyes was unmistakable. But it was gone in an instant. Her eyes narrowed, and she made no attempt to add anything further.

"Surely," Father Dan nodded. "You're to remember, ma'am, I'm the missionary here as well as Larry Forsyth's friend. And that means more than talking religion to Eskimos and Indians whose chief worry is for the things they can eat and drink. I've bigger responsibilities. I'm packing the trail right away. That's why I've come now. I need three months' food supplies."

"Right away? You're packing a winter trail? You're—crazy!"

"No more crazy than the man chasing caribou in the Silt Lake hills in the dead of winter. No, ma'am," Father Dan went on, sternly, "there's times when a man in my position has to forget his own comforts and risks. When he's got to remember there's folks in the world who need help. This is just that sort of time. If Larry's beyond help, there's the boy he left behind in my charge. He left him with me with clear instructions what I must do if he wasn't back inside three months, which is the time limit he's always used before when he made Leaping Horse. I shall act the way he wanted. The boy is going right away down to his folks."

The manner of the woman behind the counter eased. The man's explanation seemed to relieve something of her anxiety. She stood up from her leaning, and her strong, plump hands gestured.

"But the police," she said. "They won't make the trip in winter. Wher's the use? What can they do with the snow lying feet deep on the world? I tell you, Father, you're reading things wrong. If Simon was behind him on the river it wasn't because of Larry Forsyth. It just happened. I tell you I'm not worried for Simon. Not a little bit. I ——"

"Yet you've scouted the trail from here to Good Hope for months."

The missionary shook his head.

"I came along to have you put up the stores I need," he said, coldly, "not to go into the facts of things as I see them. But, since we're talking, I'd have you get clear the thing in my mind. There's millions of money lying back of Larry Forsyth's secret. I don't know what it is. And I don't guess you do. But Simon was hot to learn it, and had men trailing the boy ever since he made his 'strike.' Now Larry's missing, and Simon was hot on his heels. Well?"

The man spread out his hands.

"It's for—the police," he added, quickly.

For a moment Lola looked into the strong face and her narrowed eyes searched the man's. Then she forced a smile to her lips, and it had the suggestion of a sneer. Then she reached up her arms, and stretched herself, and yawned.

"Well, Father, you got your notions fixed," she said, with a shrug of her plump shoulders. "I guess it's no use telling you the foolishness of 'em. You ought to know your business. But I guess it's a crazy play. It's inhuman to pack that red-head kid over a winter trail that's worse than cold hell. If you reckon you need to, then go right to it. And if it's done I allow you're better than any Neche or Eskimo to do it. You can hand the police anything you fancy, and when they get around, why, Simon'll be here to help them to any clean-up you're fixed on. You can get all you need in the way of truck right here. But I'm taking no chances with the winter trail. It'll need to be a cash proposition."

Father Dan inclined his head.

"Surely," he agreed, as Lola moved around again to her bale of blankets. "It's all cash. Larry left me cash for everything. I'm cutting chances to the lowest notch, ma'am. I'm taking two Indian teams, and the Neches belonging them. They're the two best hunters I know—in case we get short of grub. We shall carry all the arms and ammunition we need to supply ourselves. I'm glad to know Simon'll be around when the police get here. That makes it so Dutch and your boy, Jean, won't need to scout the river any more. I'll send Oolinak and Jane Hesther over with a list of stuff, and the dollars to pay for it."

Father Dan passed out of the store and hurried home-

ward. And, as he strode over the hard, frozen snow, and gazed at the stabbing lights in the northern heavens, considering the attitude of the woman he had just left, he was at least sure of one thing. Lola feared the coming of the police. And that one thing convinced him beyond all possibility of doubt of the rightness of the action he was taking.

Had he been able to see beyond the closed doors of the store he might well have been sure of something else, too. It was the little touch of sheer human nature which none can deny, and least of all a woman.

Lola was standing precisely where he had left her. She was staring at the closed door in a bewildered sort of fashion. There was no acting now, no yawning indifference. It was no expression of fear of the police. Her gaze was bleak, helpless, without hope. It was the look of one who sees her whole world crashing about her, without strength or will to struggle against the disaster of it.

It was her man—that cold, evil thing that was her earthly god. She wanted him. And Father Dan had left her with her darkest fears confirmed. Father Dan was acting on the assumption that Larry Forsyth would never return to Fort George. What, then, after nearly four months' absence, could she hope for her Simon?

CHAPTER XV

THE RAILHEAD AT ATHABA

Father Dan's dash southward began more than two months before Christmas. And it terminated only with the final passing of February in the new year. It was upwards of four dark, dreary months of dogged endurance which permitted him no looking forward beyond the labors of each hour, and the all too brief hours of sleep demanded by exhausted Nature.

The first part of the trail was, without doubt, his gravest risk. It was an interminable region of barrens and hill country. Had he been capable of fear, it must surely have inspired it, for it was without shelter anywhere—as open,

and trackless, and liable to blind storming, as the wastes of polar ice.

But, curiously enough, it was not till the downward slopes of the great divide carried him into the more sheltered region of the Mackenzie River Valley that the battle of the elements really began. It even seemed as if that early respite spoke of an elementary conspiracy to speed him on his way.

From the moment the Mackenzie River became his highway, however, until the fierce winter storms had blown themselves out, the stress of it all claimed the very limits of the fight in him. There was hardly a moment of the journey in which he had not to herd his Indians to the work. The well-being of his dogs was an endless nightmare. And he was nursing and tending their frozen feet till it seemed as if he had never done anything else in all his life.

Then food. Over blind miles of uninhabited, trackless wastes it had to be spared, husbanded to the point of starvation. Every league of distance gained over that interminable valley was at a spiritual and bodily expense that was well-nigh bankruptcy.

But his courage and sense of responsibility never faltered. And when, finally, he drove into sunlit visibility, out of a blinding gray fog of blizzard, and beheld a cluster of snowy hummocks which were, in fact, the habitations of the long-desired white man's post at the railhead of Athaba, the missionary in him was completely submerged in the hard-drawn musher of the northern trail. He had fought his way successfully over more than a thousand miles of the world's worst desolation.

Lean, drooping, without an ounce of spare flesh on a body that felt as though it would never know anything but weariness again, with a face blistered with suppurating frost-bite, and with eyes half blinded with the glare of a world of snow, without pause he led his precious charge to the primitive quarters of Superintendent Richard Ferrers of the police. And it was done with something of the relief of a man who knows that the limits of bodily and spiritual endurance have been plumbed to their remotest depths.

The relief of that moment had been exquisite. Father Dan had worn himself to the bone, but he had brought Andy

through without mischance of any sort. The boy had shared in every stress. He, too, had fought the battle of it all with a courage and faith that had never faltered. Father Dan had felt it to be the triumph of the spirit which told of the man and woman who had bred the lad. Never for one moment did it occur to his unassuming mind that his own faith, skill, and courage had been the rock upon which the child heart had leaned.

But Father Dan's arrival at the railhead was only a preliminary to all the rest. He required from the Superintendent a promise of police help and set about obtaining it forthwith.

It entailed his story, every detail of it. And, as he sat over the great wood-stove in the officer's dugout quarters, luxuriating in a warmth he had never before so fully appreciated, with Andy sitting close beside him, as though fearful of being separated from his beloved protector, he told it all in careful sequence, from the time of Larry Forsyth's coming to Lake Whitewater, to his setting out on his final trip to Leaping Horse.

He missed nothing of the events of those years which had a shadow of significance—the secret "strike" Larry had made at Big Waters; its obvious wealth; Simon's attempts to discover it by the aid of hired gunmen; his attempt to get the secret of it from the dying wife; and, finally, the man's hot pursuit of Larry personally. He told of Larry's instructions to him, his time limit for his own return. And he did not fail to impress Lola's concern for Simon's continued absence.

He made the whole thing crystal-clear for this keen-faced, dark, clean-shaven, slight man, whose interest never flagged. Dick Ferrers interrupted only with pointed questions to help himself to a closer grip of the case. And, at the end of the long story, he had reached across the stove to grip the missionary by the hand.

"Well, Father," he smiled, as their hands met, "I know you well enough by reputation, though this is the first time we've met. But I want to say at once, the man who can make the thousand-odd miles from here to Whitewater, with no better than a bunch of malemutes, and a brace of

low-grade Neches, in the dead of Arctic winter, at the bidding of a friend, and for the sake of a red-head kid with as much nerve as himself, is going to get all the police help we can hand him."

Their hands had fallen apart, and the policeman had studied the weary face so grimly set beyond the stove. Then he turned to the vivid blue eyes of the boy who was watching him eagerly.

"I guess you're dead right, Father," he said, thoughtfully. "Your story suggests ugly work to me. But it also suggests that that boy, Simon Duchette, hasn't got away with it the way he figured. No."

He gazed out through the frosted window at the winter glare beyond.

"We can't move till the ice goes," he went on, after a moment. Then, with a smile: "Maybe we can't hit a thousand miles of winter the same as you. But we'll pass you along down East over the rail to Calford so you can turn this kid over to his father's folks. Then you can have them set the Law moving in the matter of the money lying at the Leaping Horse bank. You can't handle that end of the proposition any other way. It's up to the boy's folks. Then you can hit right back here. Meanwhile, you best pay off your Neches. And when you make here, when the ice goes out of the river, I can send you up to Whitewater with the patrol I'm going to have investigate. I'm going to get right after this thing. I'm going to check up what's happened with those two boys, and get after those gunmen. It looks like a killing, and I'll see it clear through to the end."

Then he shook his head.

"It's dollars! Dollars, all the time! And they'll make any play to get their claws on 'em. That strike. It gets me. There isn't a thing in my stock of knowledge that's richer than gold, and can be hauled so you can't find it. Diamonds?"

Father Dan smiled as well as his frost-bites would permit. The intrigue of that "strike" was in the policeman's eyes.

"I haven't an idea," he said. And he told of Larry's refusal to reveal his secret even to his own wife.

They sat for awhile discussing every possible treasure known to them. And, in the midst of it all, Andy spoke for the first time, displaying plainly the eager alertness of his child's mind.

"You forgot the Bible, Uncle Dan," he reminded.

The policeman noted the eagerness of it, and looked at the missionary. Father Dan smiled around at the boy.

"No, son, I hadn't," he said, with a shake of his head. "But that Bible isn't for a soul but you. Not even for the police." Then he turned to the officer. "It's his father's last message before he went. And it's to him. It's the key to the fortune Andy's got to get when he's learned so he can read it aright. He's got to grow up and get the right knowledge. Then there's millions of treasure waiting for him up at Big Waters. It's set out in a Bible that was his mother's. And it's hidden where no crooks will find it."

Superintendent Ferrers spread out his hands.

"The secret of millions of treasure!" he cried. "And you've never looked ——?"

The shake of Father Dan's head came at once.

"It's Andy's," he demurred simply.

"And what about—others?" Ferrers asked, shrewdly.

"No one knows of the book but Mary."

Ferrers stiffened.

"Can they get at her?" he asked, sharply.

Father Dan stared. His trusting mind became troubled at once. Mary! He had left her behind. And she knew of the Bible containing Larry's secret. She was unprotected, except for Oolinak and Jane Hesther.

"Mary wouldn't tell, ever, Uncle Dan," he said, confidently. "Not—not if they killed her!"

Ferrers smiled at the boy.

"How old is she?"

"Eleven."

Ferrers flung up his hands.

"Say," he cried, "you've a bunch in your two kiddies that'll take a heap of beating, Father! 'Not if they killed her!'" He stood up and reached a hand to the boy. "Well, good luck to your red head, old feller," he cried, as Andy took the hand held out. "Good luck to Mary, too. And you,

Father. I like grit, and you folks suit me. Now I'll put things over the wire right away. And your outfit'll be ready for you right here when the ice goes out."

That was all months ago. And it was not until May was nearly over that Father Dan returned to Athaba to avail himself of the policeman's promise.

In those many weeks Father Dan had traveled far, and it had been infinitely more wearisome travel than had been the frozen trail of winter. He had completed his task as he had planned it. He had left nothing undone. He had handed Andy over to his father's folks, and had seen him to the college that was to give him the knowledge his father had desired for him. He had handed over the trust money he held to those whom the law had appointed to receive it. He had set the law in motion with regard to the bank at Leaping Horse. There was nothing more. Then he had taken his farewell of the boy, whose last words haunted him every mile of his homeward journey northward.

"Get back quick to Mary, Uncle Dan," Andy had urged. "You won't let 'em kill her, will you?"

Superintendent Ferrers at Athaba was unsparing of the help he had promised. It was not only the story Father Dan had told him that had appealed, it was the missionary's personality that had caught his imagination, and that of the blue-eyed, red-headed boy he had brought with him.

When Father Dan reached the railhead again, as the ice went out, the police patrol, in charge of Sergeant Spence, and with a half-breed mechanic to crew the patrol boat, was ready for the northward journey. In presenting Sergeant Spence to the missionary the Superintendent was at no pains to disguise the importance he attached to the trip.

"The big thing," he said, "looks to me to locate those two boys, alive or dead. Maybe they'll have got back since you quit with the boy. But I don't think so. Maybe we're acting on the rush. I'm taking a chance on that. It's my experience when there's a big 'strike' anywhere, there's mostly trouble that needs police attention. Ye-es. Well, anyway, Sergeant Spence is the man to sort it out. He's got

to locate what's happened to those boys. The rest can come later. He's wiser to your part of the country than any man under my command. He's used to the things north of sixty. I guess he'll pull the game all right. He's the man who cleaned up that Alphaine outfit in the Barrens. I've outlined the trouble to him as you handed it me, Father. I guess you can fill in the details on the trip."

So they had set out on the long journey on the full spring flood of the Mackenzie River. They shipped by the first stern-wheel freighter that set out in the wake of the northward-drifting ice. And, in due course, they reached Fort Good Hope at the mouth of Hope River.

To the missionary, who knew only dog-sled and kyak in his daily life, it was a journey of amazing ease and speed. It was almost too easy. He missed the hazard to which he was accustomed—the hazard of the elements under the normal, primitive conditions of his life.

At any rate, it served him well enough. His urge to reach the child, Mary, eased under the sense of speed. And as the stout vessel ploughed its way on the spring flood, he was able to impress the last details of the story of Lake Whitewater upon a man whose shrewd understanding and insight convinced him of his own rightness in appealing to the police.

But if the journey down the interminable Mackenzie meant ease to Father Dan, it was not comparable in its luxury to facing the swift stream of Hope River in a police motor patrol. To him Hope River had always meant paddle and portage till existence well-nigh became a burden.

Now he lounged at his ease with the cool, broad-shouldered, steady-eyed policeman at the tiller, facing a stream of which he had no real knowledge. Then there was the half-breed police scout, Loti, crouched over his engine, observing its right functioning like some dusky image, while the deeps of the Mackenzie Valley dropped away behind them. They traveled through a world of blinding spring mists, low shores of treacherous tundra, and dank, tattered, windswept, primordial forests. There was an air about these police servants that pleased Father Dan mightily.

The trip up Hope River would have taken the missionary weeks under the ordinary conditions in which he traveled.

As it was, they reached the headwaters, just below the mountain tarn, poised amidst the glacial world that fed it, in a matter of a few days. But it was already the full of sub-arctic summer. They found a melting, dripping, booming world under a scorching blaze of heat.

Once the stout, well-fendered patrol boat entered the gorge at the headwaters, it had to fight for every inch of way. The flood of the stream was only just short of torrential. Furthermore, it was thick with masses of ice torn from the melting glaciers, moving, melting, sliding to destruction under a heat they could no longer resist on the dizzy heights above.

For the most part the granite walls of the canyon rose sheer from the depths of the river. They were grimly sterile and overwhelming. Sometimes they receded abruptly, falling back into wide areas of precipice embracing a swirl of ice-filled waters in which no river craft could have endured for more than moments. On the other hand, there were stretches where the gorge closed in, narrowing the stream down, squeezing it, pinching it till it raced in furious panic to escape the threat. Then, every once in a while, there came a vast rift in the granite walls, to admit the torrent of a minor gorge which set the flood churning like a storm-tossed sea.

It was all grim and frowning. A thousand echoes seemed to boom from rock to rock as the ice crashed from above. The rugged magnificence of it all was inspiring. But it was without grace, without one vestige of natural smiling. It was an iron world that forbade. It frowned on intrusion and thundered its fierce displeasure. But, in face of the skill and nerve of the northern riverman, it was like some granite monster, furious to destroy, bound, helpless, completely impotent.

It was at the rounding of a sharp, blind bend, where the water race was only just defeated by the gasping engine with its throttle wide. Spence flashed a glance across at Father Dan from his watch on the grinding ice floes.

"What follows this?" he asked.

Father Dan's reply was instant.

"The lake." And he stared ahead where the narrowed cliffs were beginning to fall back.

Spence dodged a vast mass of snow-laden ice by inches.

"Where things petrify?" he asked, and his steady eyes were lit by a smile.

"Sure."

"Tell me some?"

Father Dan shook his head and his eyes twinkled.

"They called it Silt Lake before the river got its name," he said, "and I guess it was Simon Duchette called it that way. A year in its waters and you'd be a swell imitation of a stone image. Maybe we'll need to clean the bottom of this craft when we reach across it. There's queer things in this northern territory. Like the lake that's always whispering 'way up north. When it's frozen deep in winter it kind of gets mad and blows open the ice, whispers awhile, and shuts down again. Queer? Sure. This lake is just the dump for the big glaciers lying around it. It feeds two rivers. One going east. Our river. And this one. It's a low, barren, silt shore where nothing grows. It's sort of muskeg, too, with few dead-safe landings till it's frozen solid. It can storm in two minutes so this craft couldn't live. It's right on top of the world where Nature has no sort of manners. And the winds figure monkeys don't know anything about tricks."

Father Dan raised an arm pointing ahead where the hills gave way completely, and a steel-blue horizon seemingly reached for miles.

"There's the line of its waters," he said, and gazed at the sky, studying it with eyes that were full of understanding. "We're lucky," he said, at last. "There's not a breath of wind in that sky. And there won't be till we're across, anyway. The stream's easing. And poor Loti won't need to worry for his kettle any more. Halfway across the lake we make the eastern stream."

Spence nodded.

"And you folks make the stuff we've come through in walrus kyaks?" he asked.

Father Dan searched the distance.

"We pick our seasons. Say, Sergeant, I'd advise getting right over to the far side to make camp."

"Yes. We won't wait for any of those winds. How long to cross?"

Father Dan considered.

"A kyak would make it in six hours, maybe. You see, there's the stream. We won't be so quick in this."

"No." Spence considered. "That boy, Larry Forsyth, was he wise to this lake? Its storming, I mean?" he asked, presently.

Father Dan turned abruptly. His deep-set eyes were startled.

"I hadn't considered that," he said, thoughtfully. "Oh, yes, sure. I'd say he knew this lake. Only he used to make Leaping Horse on a winter trail. That way he only met it in blizzard time. That's an idea."

Spence produced his pipe for the first time since entering the gorge of Hope River, and prepared to smoke.

"Yes," he agreed. "We'll make camp on the far side, and —get a look around."

CHAPTER XVI

SILT LAKE

The two men were standing on the low foreshore with the curiously clouded waters of the lake almost at their feet lapping with a summer gentleness that was wholly illusory. Not a breath of wind was stirring. There was scarcely a ripple on the shining mirror spread out before them. Yet there was a keen nip in the air, in spite of the sunshine, and it made them glad enough of the thick parkas enveloping their bodies.

Nearby, the half-breed, Loti, was at work on his boat, which had been hauled clear of the water. He was scraping its bottom, which was scaled thickly with a gray deposit that clung tenaciously. The man had little concern for anything else. His whole mental horizon was bounded by the efficiency of his craft. It was for him to be sure that his boat would take his superior officer wherever he wanted to go. And, having done so, to bring him back again. For the time, at least, although he had not eaten for many hours,

the food that was stewing over a driftwood fire a few yards farther up the shore was of no sort of interest to Loti.

Father Dan was gazing out over the great tarn. He was absorbed by the spectacle of the range of glacial hills that completely encompassed it. It was a scene of shimmering splendor. The sunlight had transformed the snow and ice into a dazzling world of crystal that glittered and shone like the most perfect alabaster. There was not a tree, nor a blade of grass, nor even the gray-green of arctic lichen anywhere. It was just a world of ice fields, and snow, and gray rock, and the shining waters of the lake.

Father Dan flung out an expressive hand.

"It's too bad a scene like this is forbidden to us in our daily lives," he exclaimed. "The air's like breathing diamonds. Those hills are as if they'd just been set there to look at and dream. And this lake—look at it! Shining like a perfect mirror of all that's beautiful in the world." He laughed. "And I've seen it when —— No, I don't think I could tell you if I tried."

Spence was observing the still waters. Nor did he change the direction of his gaze in response to the other's appreciation. All he did was to raise an arm, pointing.

"What do you make of that?" he asked, sharply. "There. Right out there nearly a half mile. Do geese an' things light around this lake? Duck? Look along where I'm pointing. You'll just make it. It's riding low. If there was wind you wouldn't see it."

Father Dan searched for some silent moments. Then he, too, pointed.

"I see it," he cried. "But there's not a thing lives in these waters. Not even fish. It's something afloat. Maybe driftwood. Only ——"

Spence turned.

"Only—what?"

"Why, there's not a forest within twenty miles of here. And you can't drift stuff up against a stream."

Spence turned to the man at the boat.

"You can quit cleaning her," he said, sharply. "We'll run her into the water right away!" Then he turned to the missionary. "We got to get that," he said. "It's adrift just

short of your Hope River stream. It's in slack water. If it makes the stream we'll lose it."

Spence was alert to his finger-tips. Something was afloat out there where nothing seemed to have any right. He meant to know what it was.

Loti had his boat re-floated and its engine running in a few minutes, and presently it was chugging its way out on the lake.

But it was a little difficult. Standing ashore the angle of view had been something wider. Now it was narrowed down almost to the level of the water. At last Spence discovered his objective and drove head on for it.

The boat ran up alongside a nearly submerged, massive object. It was an elongated bundle that was black and heavily corded. The impact of the nose of the boat set it lurching. It drifted rapidly away like something alive and fearful. And the three men sat gazing after it.

It was Father Dan who spoke. And in his deep voice was a note of urgency.

"That's Larry's!" he cried. "That's part of his outfit! His old rubber sheet fixed around it! I'd know that sheet anywhere! Why's it afloat in this water? Why's it here—anyway?"

Spence turned to Loti with a sharp order. And in a moment the boat turned in pursuit of the drifting bundle.

The derelict bundle of Larry Forsyth's outfit was lying opened out on the shore. Father Dan and Sergeant Spence were gazing down at its disappointing contents. Loti was again cleaning his boat.

Father Dan had not been mistaken. The bundle had proved to be that which he had seen lashed in Larry's canoe when he set out for Leaping Horse. Furthermore, when it had been hauled ashore, Father Dan's claim for the corroding, petrifying qualities of the waters of Silt Lake was proved beyond question. The whole thing was stiff with a cement-like deposit, and its lashings snapped brittlely the moment an attempt was made to unfasten them. Some quality in the rubber sheet, however, had kept the wrapping pliable, and it had been opened out without destruction.

Their disappointment was profound. Neither Father Dan nor the policeman had paused to consider what the contents of the bundle were likely to be. But the sight of a large collection of rotting driftwood and peat fuel was not inspiring.

It lay there now, a heaped pile, saturated and reeking with the rotten odor of its kind. And somehow the sight of it was not without pathos. Spence looked up at last and a queer light was in the glance that accompanied his gesture.

"I'd say driftwood's the northern trailman's treasure, all right. But you can't trade it at a price better than gold."

Father Dan agreed.

"Sure. But I'd rather have that bunch of stuff on a winter trail than all the gold that ever came out of Forty-mile Creek. Anyway," he added, with a sigh, "it's liable to be good for us before we make Whitewater. We shan't need to worry for fuel."

Spence's smile had vanished.

"No," he said. "We'll need to keep it just like we found it. It's evidence of that boy. And, so far, the only evidence. We'll bale it again and tote it with us. Then we'll eat and take a look around. Get a line on this, Father. We find that bunch in the slack water clear of the stream. Why? Is it because when his boat broke up, which looks likely, he was around this shore? Is it that the lake was storming and wrecked him? Somehow I don't fancy that way."

He gazed out in an easterly direction where the shining waters vanished around a glacial headland. He pointed.

"That's the head of your Hope River, you reckon. He came up there. Would he have made the lake while it was storming?" He shook his head. "He'd have camped right there and waited."

Spence shrugged his heavy shoulders in the finality of his conviction.

But Father Dan was less sure.

"There's been winter since then," he demurred. "Maybe he was caught somewhere across the lake. This bunch may have been frozen down all winter and drifted with the spring thaw."

But Spence disagreed.

"That don't suit me, Father," he said, keenly. "If that was away out in the ice it would have gone with the drift, west or east. That's been lying up around here, close in shore. Maybe it wasn't under the ice all winter but was lying ashore, and got drifted out on the spring flood from the hills. You've got to remember there was a feller after him, trailing for—maybe, murder. I'd like to guess there's a camp around somewhere along this shore from here to that headland where your river breaks out. We've got to go right over that territory with a spy-glass. And I'll gamble a month's pay it'll tell us something. Gee! This driftwood stinks. We best bale up again."

Spence dropped to his knees and re-packed the unfortunate man's treasured driftwood. And he went on talking the while.

"It makes you wonder, Father, when you handle this truck," he said, in his quiet, easy way. "Once you hit the ice regions it's just junk like this stands between all you hope for and a frozen death. Driftwood! The world's meanest waste! And even that isn't plentiful enough. Some of this looks like peat. Hunks of peat. Well, I allow I've been ready to use most anything for firing in my time, but I can't say I've ever worried to tote peat on the trail."

"There's plenty peat along our river lower down," Father Dan replied. "I guess Larry knew the winter trail better than any man I've ever known. Then he was red-hot on the science of things. Maybe he had ways of using peat better than most of us."

"In a stove—yes," Spence said, unconvinced.

The bale was re-made and secured with a spare rope from the boat. Then Spence stood up from his task and spat.

"That stuff's tough," he said in disgust at the reek of the bundle. "We best eat. Then we'll make a big search all along to that headland—before the wind starts to blow."

Father Dan's lean face was expressive of deep emotion. He was quite unmoving. He just looked. His deep-set eyes were wide and troubled. Spence was at work. Some distance away he was crouching over one of the two dire objects they had suddenly come upon.

They had been searching for hours over the rockbound foreshore, following its line right up to the shadow of the glacial headland which marked the outlet of Hope River. And it was in that shadow they were standing now. The cliff went up sheer from a sandy, silt shore that was dotted about with loose rocks that appeared to have been hewn and dropped from the cliff face above. Otherwise it was just a queer gray shore that suggested submersion when the spring flood-water was in spate.

Father Dan was standing beside two masses of rock with a narrow division between them. They were set deep in the silt with an outcrop of some five or six feet. And that which he was looking at was the still form of a dead man, with a red head, held jambed in the division between the rocks.

Spence was some twenty yards away. He was crouching beside the cliff wall itself, just clear of where the lake washed its base. He was half hidden behind a huge bowlder which held another human body firmly jambed between it and the headland. It was the body of Simon Duchette.

He was through with his examination and was considering the upturned face of which the eyes were wide open. And it was the eyes that held him fascinated. The pale blue of them, the perfect whiteness surrounding the pupils. The dead thing looked as though life had only just passed out of its body. There was not a sign of decomposition. And yet the policeman knew the man must have been dead months, been frozen stiff when the world froze about him, and again been thawed out when the sun came back and melted even the hill-tops. That the body was there at all did not surprise him. It was held firmly by the rocks, and must have lain there laved by the petrifying waters throughout the whole time of the spring floods.

At last he stood up from his work and went back to the missionary beside the dead body of Larry Forsyth. As he came, he realized something of Father Dan's emotion. For some moments he stood beside the big figure that dwarfed his own in height, and he, too, regarded the unkempt red head that seemed almost incongruous in death.

At last Father Dan turned, and when he spoke, in spite

of the grief in his dark eyes, it was in a tone of unmistakable satisfaction.

"The other only got him—once," he said. "It must have been a battle of wits. And it must have lasted quite a while. These rocks have been plugged by twenty shots at least. And only one got him. Through the right lung. I wonder. Was it first or last? I'd guess first. I'd guess Simon sneaked up on him. And Larry must have put up the fight of his life with a bad hole torn through a lung. Man, he had grit!"

Spence turned again to the red head, which, like the other, was unmarred by decomposition. The dead man's vivid blue eyes were almost alive.

"I don't guess he had much on the other for grit, Father," he said, quietly. "It took seven holes in Simon's big body to bump him off. But I'd say your man's wits were the better. Yes, I guess you're right. Simon got that shot in on sight. Maybe he came in around that headland and didn't wait for compliments. That's how it looks. Then Larry pulled. And then came the shooting match under cover of these rocks."

"Larry was like chain-lightning at that sort of game," Father Dan nodded appreciatively. "And he never missed when he pulled. Maybe he was sitting over his camp-fire," he mused, "when ——"

"But's lightning's not quick enough when the other's got the drop on you. I'd say it was this headland pulled the game against him. If he'd seen! Known! Well, Father, we got to thank this lake, anyway, for the thing it's done for you and me. Those bodies we've to tote back to your Mission are as surely pickled as though they'd been steeped in raw alcohol. There's not a sign of decay. And—I'm thankful that's so. We've got to live with them days in the boat."

"You mean they're not to be buried here?"

Spence shook his head.

"Maybe police work isn't familiar to you," he said. "There's that trader's wife. Then there's Larry Forsyth's boy, and his bank roll. No, we need every identification, and a regular burial at your home post. And I've to take back a full report to headquarters. Everything we've located needs to go with us to your post—even their guns, choked

up with silt. Well, the chance of things has made it easy for everyone. It looks like those hired gunmen don't figure in the play. This lets them out. But we know the boy you brought along down is a sure orphan. And we know that tough female at Whitewater is a sure widow-woman. We can't hand them back the life these boys chose to gamble away. But we can straighten things out for those they left behind.

"Yes, it's been an easier trip than it looked when we started out," he went on, after a pause. "Maybe that's how it is with things generally. The thing that grieves me is that my orders don't include making Big Waters. You see, we haven't learned a thing of the game he was playing, and I've a hunch it would be good for the government to get in on that place. Some way, it don't seem to me we're through with—things. There's folks left behind, as I said. There's that bunch of gunmen with their noses in the game. There's that boy Andy with the Bible you're holding for him till he's right to have it. Does it suggest to you, Father? Does it all look blue sky ahead in the world where blue sky don't seem rightly to belong?"

Father Dan had turned, and was gazing out over the lake, and his deep-set eyes were gloomy. He shook his head.

"No," he said. "I'm just wondering what does come next."

"Me, too," Spence went on, in his quiet, keen way. "It don't finish here. No-o. Someone'll be out hot after Big Waters before that boy's grown. It looks to me you aren't through with the trouble yet, Father. Well, we'll hike on and get through with this. And don't forget there's always that trail south. And you know where to locate us at the end of it."

The Treasure of Big Waters

Part II

Mary

CHAPTER I

TWO YEARS LATER

FATHER DAN looked up with a start and listened intently. He was lying in his bunk, propped against bundles which Jane Hesther had improvised as pillows. There was a quick frown of anxiety in his eyes; there was a sudden tightening of his jaw muscles, too.

He laid the book he had been reading face downward on the blankets beside him. His whole attention was given to the door of the hut, dimly outlined in the yellow light of the lamp on the wall above his head. It was shaking under a violent gust of wind—shaking and rattling, and a thin flurry of powdered snow had blown in underneath it. It was a sudden gust where before all had been deadly still.

After awhile the sounds died out. And, as they did so, Father Dan again became aware of the tuneless crooning of Jane Hesther somewhere out there in her kitchen place, and of the comforting crackle and splutter of the liberally banked woodfire on the dug-out hearth across the room.

It was the depth of winter. For hours now the snow had been falling. That still, deadly, silent, arctic snowfall, when the flakes lolled down from a lightless sky the size of falling leaves.

He did not return to his book. Instead he turned his head and hailed the crooning Eskimo from her quarters.

Father Dan was a prisoner to his bunk. He was not a sick man, but he was incapacitated in a fashion he hated. It had happened more than a week back now—a fall on the ice of the lake miles away from the Mission. He had been returning from a distant Indian settlement, and was clambering his way over a patch of broken ice. The fall had cost him a sprain of his right ankle that was almost a break. And only his own hardihood, and the fact of his dog train, had saved him from becoming a complete casualty.

He had struggled home enduring agony, and forthwith he had been promptly called upon to suffer the well-inten-

tioned ministrations of Jane Hesther, who was a veritable compendium of native quacks and nostrums. Finally, he had reduced her efforts to the simple business of fomentations, which she performed with painful thoroughness.

His incapacity irked, but he endured the enforced idleness with characteristic fortitude. He knew the value of sound and sturdy limbs in a territory where only the strong survived, and help was the last thing to look for under the mocking light of the aurora.

Jane Hesther ambled into the room. She came padding over to the side of the bunk, her fat body bulging and shaking as she moved. One hand was grasping the handle of a camp kettle of boiling water, and the other was bearing a handful of swabs. Her crooning had ceased, And, in place of her wonted smile of amiability her broad, flat face was unusually frowning.

Father Dan beheld the frown with misgiving and wondered. But verbally he ignored it.

He sat up and dropped his injured foot over the side of the bunk. And as he did so he nodded his head at the door.

"I'm worried, Jane Hesther," he declared. "There's a big blow coming. And it's coming before this snow can freeze. If they don't get along back in two hours Oolinak'll hit a blind storm out in the ice of the lake."

Jane Hesther was kneeling at his feet. She had begun her ministrations without a word. She was laving the swollen ankle with swabs whose fierce heat made the injured man squirm. Now she shot an upward frowning glance.

"Him storm lak hell bimeby," she grunted, indifferently.

"I wouldn't have sent him only that poor squaw and her two kids are starving since her man went under the ice. But Mary! That naughty, crazy kid is with him. I've warned her again and again she's not to make trail in winter. I'm angry with her. Very angry. She stole out because I was here and couldn't stop her. She must have fixed it all with Oolinak. It's —— Think of that poor kid out there on the lake when it storms!"

Jane Hesther made no reply. She dealt with the hot water with the indifference of a Salamander, and the man was forced to endure.

"Oolinak should have known better," Father Dan grumbled on. "He knew a storm was coming. He said so. But it's Mary's dogs. That wretched loose leader she's trained. Benjie! She's crazy about them. She thinks of nothing else." He shook his head a little helplessly. "I'll—I'll have to take a firm hand with that child. She's growing up fast. She's ——"

"She'm alrigh', that Mar-ee—that way," Jane Hesther flashed another upward glance, but the tone of her voice was harshly significant. "Her mak 'm fool all mans all time. Oh, yes. Jane Hesther! Oolinak! Him good boss, all same. Bimeby Mar-ee an' Oolinak mak back. Mar-ee laff lak all sort. She'm make plenty laff. You mak 'em not go—never!"

Father Dan sat with gritted teeth as a fresh scalding was operated. He knew Jane Hesther was right. Since Andy had left Whitewater, more than two years ago, the girl had developed miraculously. She had changed, too, in an extraordinary degree. The child was gone out of her. Although she was only about fourteen, she went about life with the will of a grown woman. It was disturbing. He felt his helplessness now that he was incapacitated. But he refused to admit his negation of authority.

"But I should have stopped her," he demurred, sharply.

The woman flung up her head, and her big eyes rolled.

"Not—never!" she ejaculated. "You'm stop her? Then you'm mak 'em this fish boy, Jean, stop trail him Mar-ee all time plenty!"

"What d'you mean?"

"All mush plenty bad."

It came sullenly. It came with all the urging savagery latent in the woman. She flung her swabs at the man's foot as though angry with them. And Father Dan realized the storm of feeling driving her.

"Tell me," he said. And his manner was purposely soothing.

Jane Hesther sat back on her moccasined heels. There was no attempt to hide her feelings. Her eyes rolled and were alight with savage anger. And the man understood now her first unsmiling approach.

"Mans all bad," she cried, flailing her arms threateningly.

"Him boy! Him Jean! Us know'm this fish boy. Yes. Him so as a coyote when him sun mush plenty shine. Jane Hesther know'm all dis thing. Oh, yes. Mar-ee mak trail? So him boy mak trail. Mar-ee mak river—swim lak anything? Then him Jean mak swim. All same mush bad eye for Mar-ee. Mar-ee mak him woods. Jane Hesther mad all big scare. Boy Jean mak woods same lak Mar-ee him gal. Jean him big boy. Mush bad feller all time plenty bad eye."

Father Dan stared down incredulously at the passionate mother woman. He heard, but could not believe. But the frank downrightness of it was compelling.

"You think ——?" he began, and broke off.

"All mans think," Jane Hesther cried at him, with wide eyes. "Only good boss not so, too. Us kill'm. Oolinak kill'm all dead. Jane Hesther mush kill'm dead. Mans all kill'm up dead same lak nothing not good. No!"

Father Dan was badly startled. It was not the shock of the woman's first charge against the boy, Jean. That had passed almost as it came. It was the final threat of these two to kill the boy who was pursuing Mary with evil intent. He knew this passionate, loyal, devoted creature. He knew the no less passionate Oolinak. Their adoration of Mary was blind to all reason. It was without limit. Threat to kill on Mary's behalf was something to take very, very seriously.

He sat considering for some moments while the howl of the now risen gale again made itself heard and felt. Suddenly he frowned down at the kneeling woman. He held up an admonishing finger, as though warning some small child. And he spoke with a severity that had instant effect.

"Jane Hesther," he began, solemnly, "if you hurt that boy, if you interfere with him, if you touch ——"

"Man's not hurt, not touch. Only kill!"

"If you do anything of these," Father Dan went on, ignoring the interruption, "I'll send you and Oolinak right down to the police, who'll shut you up so you never see Mary again—ever! You get that? Prison! Punishment! You, an Eskimo, kill a white boy! You leave me to deal with him. I promise you he'll never harm your Mary—that way."

The rolling eyes avoided his. He saw the lowering of the full lids. He waited. Then he saw a movement of the heavy,

wide mouth, and realized a smoldering rebellion. Instantly he challenged.

"Listen!" he ordered, sharply. "You're going to promise, Jane Hesther. You'll promise—now. Touch Jean—and the police!"

There was a moment while the woman's rebellion held. Then the fiercely drawn brows relaxed, and the rolling eyes stilled.

"Us promise."

"And Oolinak, too."

"Us promise."

"Good. And so do I promise. Jean shall quit trailing Mary."

It was over. The woman's amiable smile dawned again, and she bent over her work. Father Dan was content.

That was the finish of all talk between them. Jane Hesther went on to the completion of her task. Then she stood up and gazed, with a wonder that never failed, while Father Dan applied his, to her, mysterious lotions. The sight of the final skillful re-adjustment of his primitive bandage banished the last of her ill-mood. She busily gathered her swabs, wrung them out, and then muttered her way back to her quarters.

Father Dan gazed after her. He was inclined for a final warning as she went. But he decided against it. In spite of her fiery, headlong nature, Jane Hesther, he reminded himself, was as honest as only primitive humanity can be.

He remained for awhile considering the thing of which she had warned. A boy of fifteen. A girl of less than fourteen. Was it possible that sex was driving the lad? Well, it was possible. He was pretty sure the boy was vicious. How could it be otherwise, seeing he was the son of the dead Simon? And of Lola—yes, Lola.

But somehow it occurred to him that sex did not enter into this thing. He knew that Jean had taken an active part in his mother's affairs since Simon had gone. He knew that these people, all three of them, were actively prosecuting secret affairs. And his mind leaped to the fact of his own possession of that Bible key to the vast wealth which Larry

had claimed to be still lying hidden up at Big Waters. He felt that the boy's attentions to Mary were—espionage.

For two years and more Father Dan had thought and watched for the reaction that he felt must come to the disastrous close of the feud between Larry Forsyth and Simon Duchette. And the process of it had wrought a change in him, a change that seemed almost impossible in a man so absorbed in the selfless spiritual calling that was his. He realized it himself, and was undisturbed. Something had gone out of him. And something of infinitely baser quality had taken its place. For years the human fighting spirit had been held under, suppressed, almost entirely thrust out of his existence. Now it had leaped into active life.

And he was glad of it. There was Andy, many hundreds of miles away, obediently equipping himself for manhood, and that big adventure which his reckless father had bequeathed to him. Then there was Mary moving up so swiftly to her womanhood. They were his charge, both of them. He wanted to protect them. He intended to.

So had been awakened that dormant fighting spirit, and with it had come its natural accompaniments. He knew ready suspicion. He had learned real hatred. And, even, he knew fear itself.

At last he swung up his legs and stretched himself out on his bunk. But instead of returning to his beloved book he leaned back on his pillows with his hands clasped behind his head. He lay there listening to the now furious howling blizzard outside, and his mind leaped back over those two years to the time when he and Sergeant Spence had brought down from the Silt Lake the almost petrified bodies of Larry Forsyth and Simon Duchette.

He had foreseen the threat of coming reaction then. There had been omen enough. He was never likely to forget the manner in which Lola had received the news of her man's death. He had seen her comely face harden. He had seen her lips shut tight. The cold emotionlessness of her!

Then her lips had remained unopened for any lamentation when they had carried the dead Simon's body into her store. And later, in response to the policeman's official interrogations, so far as truth went, they remained tighter shut still.

She had denied anything and everything which he had known to be facts. She had never heard of any gunmen at Whitewater! Men had been hired for work at the Fort, she agreed. But they had been paid off, and had taken their departure before Simon set out on his trip. There had been no feud between Larry and Simon that she knew of! Only friendly intercourse. And as for Larry's "strike," she shrugged plump, indifferent shoulders. "Strikes," she had said, were the dream of the northern man's mind. They were just dreams. She did not believe in them—ever. And her only knowledge of Larry was that he traded at the store and paid cash, always cash. Then, when, after upwards of an hour's fruitless interrogation, she finished up with a plea to be left alone to get on with her trade so that she might be enabled to provide a mean living for her now fatherless child, Father Dan had wanted to take her by her shoulders and shake some sort of truth from between her wicked lips.

She had shown herself adamant—as iron-hard as a glacier in winter, and as frigidly indifferent. Her effrontery had staggered him and warned in no uncertain fashion. But, even so, the full of her iniquity was not revealed till later.

It had come when Spence's work had been completed, when the man took his hasty departure that he might reach his headquarters at Athaba before the freeze-up.

Father Dan had been standing on his Mission landing watching the receding patrol boat as it chugged its way up the river in the direction of Silt Lake. As it passed out of sight he turned to discover the Swede, Dutch Deazel, confronting him. Throughout the whole visit of the police the man had never once appeared!

Dutch had flung out a scornful hand after the vanished boat.

"A slick bunch, them red-coats," he snarled. "A clean-up! Tcha! I'd say they couldn't muck out a hen roost so the old dames could lay their eggs right!"

Since then Lola had made no secret of things. Not only had the Swede been hidden by her during Spence's visit, but the man was still at the post now after more than two years. Lola was hiring him. He came and went at her orders, a

threatening gunman, hated by every Indian and Eskimo in the place. Why was he there? Sex association in the case of so loathsome a creature was unthinkable to Father Dan. No, it was Big Waters. Lola had shouldered Simon's commitments, which included—Big Waters. And now, he felt, having so far failed to learn Larry's secret, they had started a campaign of espionage in the belief that through Mary they might learn something of the thing they needed.

What did they know? What did they suspect? Was it just a suspicion that Larry had left his secret behind him? Was it only the suspicion of shrewd, unscrupulous, determined folk who were relentlessly pursuing their objective? Or had they an inkling of the truth? Had Larry in his recklessness, in his later interviews with Simon, betrayed himself, and left a hint behind him? It was just possible. At any rate, he was convinced that Jean was pursuing, not Mary, but—information. And the ugly aspect of it was that Mary actually knew of the existence of the Bible key.

For upwards of an hour Father Dan searched the position in the light of his apprehensions and it made him seriously uneasy. The possibilities were profoundly threatening with a woman like Jean's mother controlling things. Yes, he felt that he would far sooner have had to deal with the implacable Simon himself than the woman he had left behind him.

Jane Hesther came in again. She came with cordwood and slabs of peat, and lavished them on his fire. He watched her, but ignored her. Her going served to divert his mind, for, as she passed out he took up his book again.

Reading was Father Dan's whole recreation, and he needed it now. But hardly had he re-found his place on the page than he was shocked by a crash, and a howl of frigid air that nearly blew his lamp out. It was the inner door. It crashed open against the wall behind it with a force that shook the building, and the room was filled with a swirling mass of flying snow.

He sat up with a jolt. Then he began to smile. There was a fur-clad figure, white with snow, that had been almost precipitated into the hut by the force of the storm. It was struggling with the door, struggling to shut and secure it against the howling wind. He watched the battle with twin-

kling eyes. Then he heard the heavy iron latch fall into its place. The next moment he was confronted by a pair of bright, laughing eyes that peered out of a high fur storm-collar from behind masses of ice.

It was Mary.

CHAPTER II

FOR ANDY

Father Dan should have been censorious. He should have been swift with the reprimand he knew was deserved. He did none of these things. He sat on his bunk with his bandaged ankle dangling over the side, and smilingly watched the girl as she rid herself of her furs.

Now Mary was squatting on the ground at his feet, a lithe, boyish figure in her buckskin shirt, and the buckskin breeches which had been fashioned for her by the handy Jane Hesther. Her snowshoes had been flung aside, her long fur parka was sprawled on them, her beaver cap was nearby, and she was struggling to remove the heavy walrus snow-boots from her feet.

With her fair, shining hair loosed from under her cap, and fallen about her shoulders, her cheeks aflame with reaction from the bitter cold of the storm, and her big eyes shining, she was literally glowing with well-being and joyous spirit. As she tugged at the clumsy boots she talked.

"I'm a bad, wicked kid, Daddy Dan, darling, and I've got to get a beating," she cried, happily. "I never said. I never asked. And I threatened Oolinak when he said it was going to storm. But I don't mind if you beat me and shut me up where I can't get out. Benjie's a—wonder dog!"

One boot was removed and flung aside. She attacked the other.

"We were twenty miles out on the lake when it started to blow. It was so black you couldn't see the reach of your hand. And Benjie just beat those twenty miles on a loose lead for home like a streak. He just didn't yaw from the straight, yet his wicked eyes were blinded with drift snow. He hogged it all and wanted more. His tail was right up,

and his big nose was right down to the snow. And he jumped in on the other dogs an' savaged them whenever they balked the storm, or didn't keep to his heels. Daddy, darling, he's the greatest thing north of sixty! A dog with more grit an' sense than haf a hundred humans!"

In the girl's abounding enthusiasm she flung the second boot aside with reckless disregard for where it went. And she stood up tall and straight with all the slim grace of her years. She looked, fearlessly smiling, into the twinkling eyes regarding her, and waited for her sentence.

Father Dan gestured a little helplessly and shook his head.

"Say, kiddie," he cried, affectionately, "you've passed me a bad time. But there's no beating coming to you—no sort of punishment at all. But maybe you'll think awhile, and remember I drove through storms as bad or worse than this to hand you food that would put life into a little starved body, and was glad when you started to live again. And for all the worry you sometimes hand me I'm not yearning to lose you. Why did you go?"

The smile had died in the girl's blue eyes. Her pretty cheeks had lost something of their glow. Father Dan had beaten her so that she felt the punishment in the very deeps of her child heart.

For a moment she stood there gazing blankly. Then there was a sudden movement—a little rush. Two slim young arms were flung about the man's neck, and soft, warm lips pressed themselves passionately to his lean cheeks. Mary hugged him tightly. Then, with a little laugh of ashamedness, she sat herself beside him on the bunk and slipped one hand under his arm. It reached to his hand, and, in a moment, it was held fast between big, rough palms.

"Oh, Daddy, don't you know? Can't you see?" Mary cried, with the old whimsical smile lighting her eyes again. "It's because of those storms you drove through on Unaga to make me live again! Because of that food, and that new life you gave me! I've lived and grown, an' I'm getting to be a woman. Would you have me sit around like a fool child image while you break your big heart to help folks? Would you have me a no-account kid all the time? When

Andy went south I fixed it all in my fool head. I guessed there was eight years till Andy got back. And when he got back he must find me the sort of woman we both guessed I'd got to be. I can handle dogs better than anybody," she went on, with unconscious pride. "Better than Oolinak, better than you! And I figured I'd learn all the rest quick, and —and rob you of any of the work I could do. That's why I went this trip. It—it was my try-out. I mushed the dogs there. And I mushed the dogs back. I just wouldn't have Oolinak do a thing. I fed those kids, and saw to them. I set their mother feeling good. I left them the way I knew you'd have left them. And now I know I can help."

The man's pressure on the girl's hand tightened, but he said no word. He sat there gazing across at the glowing fire with emotions deeply stirring.

"We can cut your work in haf, my Daddy," Mary went on, eagerly. "Haf for you, and haf for me. You can fix the sick, which I don't know about. But I do know how to stuff starving folks with the food you can spare them. And I've got Benjie! Benjie! He'll run me anywhere, everywhere, in winter," she cried, her enthusiasm leaping again. "He'll take me there, and bring me back if it storms mountains of ice and snow! Oh, Daddy, if you'd been there! It was so blind you couldn't be sure a dog was there. But he was. Always. Always! He's wise, and sheer grit from his wolf ears to his great feet pads. And the way he licked the other dogs and made them haul. My! It was just wonderful!"

Father Dan nodded his big head as he turned happy eyes on the girl.

"The trail's in your blood, kiddie," he said, with a sigh. "It's from your poor father and mother. I guess you had it all from the day you were born. Yes, go to it, Mary girl. Have it your way. We'll share the work, and you shall run your dogs just when you fancy. But don't forget, kiddie, you're all I've got. You and Andy."

And even as he gave his permission he remembered Jane Hesther's warning.

Mary remained silent, lost in the joy which Father Dan's permission had given her. Father Dan was seeking decision. He was looking for an easy approach to the thing that

must be said between them. In his new realization of the girl's rapid development he felt it to be useless to treat her as the child she was in years. He reminded himself she had acquired something of a woman's mind, a woman's power of reasoning.

At last he drew a deep breath and took the plunge.

"Lying around here useless I've been thinking a deal, kiddie," he began, thoughtfully. "I mean about things and folks. The folks at the Fort. They've been quiet. But they've been busy. The Eskimos and the mission Neches have told me. They've made big summer trips. Dutch and the boy, Jean. They've been trying Big Waters out afresh."

Mary turned at once. Her eyes were solemn as she contemplated the weather-tanned face that was so spare and calmly strong.

"You know, kiddie," he went on, simply, "we've got Andy's secret right here with us. I guess it's useless to folks without knowledge. Uncle Larry reckoned that way. That's why he left it. But sometimes I wonder if it's safe. Anyway it's ours to keep safe for Andy till he's ready. That boy, Jean. He's been coming around a deal. He's never far from the Mission with you around. Jane Hesther's been telling me. She's worried."

At the mention of Jean's name Mary began to smile. And as Father Dan finished speaking she started to chuckle. It was the old impish gurgle of childhood.

"She's worried for Andy's secret?" she asked, blandly innocent.

Father Dan stirred uneasily.

"Why, no. She doesn't know about it."

"Why's she worried?"

Father Dan found the glowing fire across the room of the deepest interest.

"For you. With—Jean coming around."

Mary's chuckle merged into a laugh of sheer mischief.

"Jane Hesther doesn't have to worry. Nor you, either, Daddy Dan," she said, slily. She edged close up. "You know, Jean isn't a boy. He's not human, or—or anything. He's just a pair of fish eyes with a big body to 'em. But he's

wicked. Sure he's wicked, like his father and—mother. But I just want him to come around."

Mary suddenly left her place at the man's side. She dived at her scattered garments and gathered them into her arms. Then she stood there before him in her buckskin shirt and breeches, a slim, laughing figure.

"He just can't come around too much," she declared. Then she pointed at the bandaged foot. "But that poor ankle of yours. It's hung long enough dangling over the side. Put it right up on the bunk and lie back on the pillows. I'll set these in my room, and then I'll tell you."

Mary ran off at once. And when she returned Father Dan had obeyed her implicitly.

"Daddy, I hate Jean worse than a Yellow Knife hates a Caribou Eater," she said, with sudden vehemence, as she perched her slim body on the edge of the bunk, and her big eyes looked fearlessly into the well-loved face above the pillows. "I hate him for his father. I hate him for his mother, and I hate him for the devil I've seen looking out of his cruel eyes. But I'm not letting him know. I'm pretending all the time. Do you know why?"

"It's—it's wicked, pretending that way."

Mary nodded, solemn-eyed.

"That's so," she agreed. "But—but I've got to." Then came her irrepressible chuckle. "Oh, Daddy he thinks he's smart and bright, and I can't see sheer through him. He thinks he's all sorts of a feller to get a kid of a girl where he wants her. He thinks I'm all tickled to death to have him around as a beau. And he tries to say all the fool things Andy never said to me. He figures Andy's cut right out of my life now, and he's the feller for me to play around with. Him with fish eyes! And I make believe. And I have him talking. I fool him all the time so he talks more, and bigger. And when he talks big, why he has to open his ugly mouth wider so he spills all the stuff I want to hear, like—like a haf-wit."

The girl's hands gestured humorously. Her head nodded wisely.

"Sure they've been chasing Big Waters," she said. "Dutch and Jean. And, oh, Daddy, they haven't located a thing!

Not a thing! They made Big Waters two summers, and they're no wiser for their trouble. And Jean's mean about Dutch. Says he's all sorts of a fool. He says one day he'll kill him only his mother stands for him and reckons she needs him, and Sergeant Spence has now fixed a police post at Fort Good Hope." She laughed. "But they've quit Big Waters now for awhile. And they're going to make a new break. And that's what I want to get at. Jean doesn't know yet. Anyway, I'm after it. But Jean's coming around isn't for himself only. Oh, if you heard the clumsy questions he's always asking, and the fool answers I make him. It's his mother. She's set him on to me. Maybe she guesses we got Andy's secret and thinks to get it through me. Me! Andy's secret! They'll get nothing, nothing, *nothing* ever from me!"

Father Dan listened, amazed, to the feeling, the hot determination in the child's denial. He had thought of her as developing swiftly. But never had he considered for a moment such strides as her manner now displayed. He offered no comment. He just lay back waiting until she had finished.

"But I'll get all I need out of Jean," she went on, rapidly. "He's as foolish as he's big and wicked. And—and I've got him just where he ought to be. Daddy, will you leave it that way? Don't ever notice? Don't ever worry? And I'll promise you when I'm through there'll be nothing I don't know inside Jean's head you could locate with a spy-glass. Only we'll need to worry if that beast-man Dutch butts in. He hasn't yet. And I guess he won't if I play Jean right. I'll see danger quick if it's coming. And I'll tell you right away. Now there's always the police at Good Hope. I guess I'm wicked, too. Maybe I'm bad all through. I feel that way. And it's for Andy. It's just for Andy who's away, and can't act for himself, and—and please, please, you won't stop me, Daddy Dan, will you?"

"No."

Father Dan's reply came hard, and sharp, and at once. And the deep-set eyes that looked back into the girl's were without a smile. At that moment the man understood that this child was possessed of a will, a spirit, even a courage

the like of which he would never have believed. It was for Andy! For Andy! And his big heart warmed at the thought.

Suddenly the hardness died from his eyes.

"No, kiddie," he said, gently. "I won't stop you. And I won't interfere till you need a man's help. I'm with you in anything you can do for Andy." He shook his head. "I never thought to see the day when I'd be at war with worse than the darkness of benighted lives. But it's so. This is war. There's just us. An oldish missioner and a bright, brave kid of a girl, against folks who'd stop at no wickedness to gain their ends. And, as you say, there's the police. Maybe I'm glad. And it's all for—Andy."

There was not a second of hesitation. A pair of strong young arms reached about his neck, and two warm young lips pressed themselves against his lined cheek. Then he was released and Mary stood up with shining eyes.

"My, I'm hungry!" she cried. "I'll go chase Jane Hesther for an eat as big as a mountain. And after I'll write to Andy. It'll be a long, long letter, because I must tell him all about—Benjie."

"But you can't get a letter through till the ice goes."

Mary had reached the doorway. The old impish smile broke out as she turned.

"I fixed it with Oolinak," she cried. "When I got the letter ready we're making winter trail with Benjie to Fort Good Hope, so it can go through on the first boat come spring. And—and—you've promised, Daddy, darling."

Father Dan flung up a pair of despairing hands.

CHAPTER III

A DEAD END

The howl of the storm about the angles of the old Fort was almost incessant. So it had been for six successive days —a world lost in a fog of wind-thrashed snow, as fine as sand particles. All trade at Lola Duchette's store was at a standstill, and those within the Fort were reduced to a mood of supreme irritation.

In the living room adjoining the store the single oil lamp

on the wall flared and smoked under a storm-urged draught. The yellow flame licked about the unclean glass of its bulbous chimney. It sooted it. Then, in a moment, it came within an ace of being extinguished.

Lola Duchette looked up from her desk. She sat there, considering the lamp pensively. Her dark eyes were hot with feeling. Her lips were tight shut. And a deep frown furrowed her even brows.

Dutch Deazel was at the far side of the room crouching over the fiercely burning wood-stove. He was in the big-seated chair that had once been Simon's. It was drawn up to the stove as close as the reddened iron sides would permit.

Jean Duchette was lounging against his mother's desk. With an elbow propped on its top he was supporting his cropped head, and his pale eyes were regarding moodily the rough-clad figure at the stove. He had just concluded what he knew to be a defense of himself. And he was awaiting a sentence he knew well enough would be unsparing.

Lola withdrew her gaze from the lamp. Her eyes sought the bulk of her huge son. They lifted to his surly face and considered it without approval. There was not a vestige of affection in her regard. She raised a hand and raked her hair with the pencil it was grasping, and spat out her impatience.

"Maybe I should have known better," she said, viciously. "Fifteen, and the voice of a man. Them, an' your size left me forgettin'. I'd thought ther' was a bunch of Simon in you. I bred you and figgered I handed you brain." She shook her head. "I was wrong. Just body an' muscle an' the sort of things any fool animal's got. Psha!"

Dutch turned from his stove and breathed sharply under the lash of that mother's contempt for her offspring. He glanced quickly at Jean's moody face, and he saw the flush of anger that faintly tinged the boy's sallow cheeks. Then he heard the retort that came hotly.

"That ain't so, Maw," Jean cried, in a voice harsh with the new manhood in him. "I got sense to know. Plenty. I ain't no blind hog chasin' a kid because she's a girl. You told me get right after her. You told me get what's lyin' back of her head. An' I done all that an' no more. I tell

you she don't know. She ain't wise to a thing, an' don't care a curse for any millions lyin' around Big Waters. All that kid knows about is her crazy dogs. That miser'ble cur, Benjie. Them, an' the notion she's goin' to do Mission trailing so Father Dan can just sit around. I ain't standin' fer no more, Maw. I'm sick bein' picked on all the time. I ain't no fool head. An' you don't have to say I am. I done the way you said. An' I done it right. She don't know. Nor don't Father Dan, she reckons."

"Hell! Hand the kid a chanct!"

Dutch spat. And, queerly for all the man's unashamed evil there was hate for the mother's malignity in his narrowed eyes. Lola was round on him in a flash.

"Tcha! Let him get his med'cine without your buttin' in," she cried, fiercely. "He's fallen for that kid of fourteen. She's set him wher' she needs, an' he's jut 'put.' He's fifteen. An' a bitch wolf could vamp him."

"You ain't no right ——!"

Lola flung up a commanding hand for the boy's silence. And she was obeyed.

"Say, listen," she snapped. Then she looked over at the Swede. "An' you, too! Get a grip on the argument, both of you, an' you'll see wher' she's fooled as she meant to. Do you guess that missioner's goin' to mush that red-head brat a thousand miles on the winter trail without it's clear in his mind why? Will he do that fer a feller without gettin' the sense of it? Have sense. That missioner knows. And that kid, who lived around with Forsyth's brat, knows, too. The boy's gone wher' he can learn his father's trade. Why, when he's full of the bank roll his father passed him? Why teach him a thing of it if his knowledge ain't to be used? It's easy. I tell you Forsyth knew the play he was makin'. He saw the game clear through, an' was takin' no chances. That boy was packed down East to learn, an' to be kept where he can't be got at till he's a man. Then he'll come right back here after those millions his father told Simon were waiting around for the boy who was wise. He's to come back an' get after them. And that missioner is right up to his back teeth in the game. Forsyth must have left behind the word he wants that kid to get when the time

comes. An' that missioner's got it for safe-keeping. You can't tell me that ain't so! An' if the missioner knows it, so does that kid girl."

The woman ceased speaking. And she sat gazing moodily across the room at the big body crouching over the stove. There was no reply to her argument. None at all. Jean just stared down at her with his queer, unexpressive eyes. Dutch continued to gaze at the reddened iron that was warming him.

Then, of a sudden, Lola bestirred. Her dark eyes lit. And they snapped with angry derision.

"Two years!" she ejaculated. "More! It makes me tired thinkin'. Ther' aint' been a thing to stop us, since Simon died, but—foolishness. Not a thing. An' what have we got to show? Only the waste of the dollars you two have cost me, spent for nix. Can you beat it? My!"

Dutch looked around.

"What's amiss with gettin' a-holt o' that kid, an'—makin' her talk?" he growled, brutally.

Lola looked into the wicked eyes that shone behind the man's question. Then she gestured in the bitterness of her contempt.

"With a police post, and that feller Sergeant Spence, lying around at Good Hope? That sounds to me as bright as anything else I ever got out of you. Psha! I've sat around waitin' fer you wise ones, you four-flush guys who reckon gunplay stands ace high. An' I'm tired. I waited years on Simon, who had brain, till he fell for the gun, and paid for his foolishness. An' now you ask me to jump in on that girl, with police around, an' prize the stuff she knows out of her with a club. Why not the missioner himself?" she mocked. She shook her head and jerked her hands out flatly. "Out!" she cried. "Plumb out! All of it. Gunman play is thro'! An'—so am I."

"You're cuttin' out?"

Dutch flung his startled question without thinking. Then, in a moment, as he saw the dark, leveled eyes shrewdly searching, he realized his mistake.

"No," Lola said, after a pause. "I'm not the sort of sap that cuts out of the game with millions in the 'kitty.'"

Dutch sprang from his chair. He stood before the stove facing the desk. And the hot light of his evil eyes challenged.

"If you ain't I am," he cried, with all the bluster he could summon on the spur of the moment. "That's flat, missis. I'm thro', clear thro' with my belly full of a territory that'll hand me nightmare till I hit the highlights where a man don't need to grope for the mouth he eats with. I've seen all I fancy of what Simon left behind him an' called it a woman. An' I've listened to all I need to hear of what you fancy passin' to those who've done their darnedest for you. I'm waitin' around no more for the kind o' dope you reckon to hand out. Millions in the 'kitty'? Are ther'?" He shook his flat-backed head. And the grin baring his teeth gave him the appearance of a wolfish snarl. "I don't know. An' I don't care. This bum layout's no sort o' use to a live man. The highlights—that's what I want. Wher' you don't live an' breathe kerosene. If ther's millions in the 'kitty' I've only looked at a wage that won't save my feet from the railroad ties when I can't pull a gun right. I ——"

"It's a wage you've never earned."

Lola flung her taunt with cold venom.

"Is that so?" Dutch leered. "Wal, I'm not worryin' fer more of it. I'm quittin'. D'you see? An' I ain't waitin' fer the ice to go out. I'm hikin' with a train of Neche dogs. I'm makin' winter trail. An' I'm pullin' when the storm blows out."

"Wher'?"

Dutch heard the quiet tone, and saw the half smile lighting eyes that had been furious only a moment before. He shrugged.

"Leapin' Horse," he snapped, roughly. "Wher' the hell else? Wher' ther's gold play with chances. Wher' you can see the color o' the stuff you're chasin', an' know it when you see it." He laughed. And his eyes narrowed. "Wher' the boys tote pokes of yeller dust an' get soused quick an' often. Sure. Leapin' Horse. Wher' the hell else?"

"Leaping Horse. Wher' Larry Forsyth made his trade. Wher' Jan Pienart, you located for Simon, has his emporium. Leaping Horse."

Dutch sucked in a breath. Lola's smile broadened, and she shook her head.

"Well, I allow you'll get the sort of life you fancy most right there, Dutch," she said, quietly. "But you don't need to risk a bum Neche train on the winter trail. You can have you pick of Simon's dogs, and some loose dogs spare. Then you don't need to beat it alone, either. Jean, here's a good trailman, if he hasn't no other sense. You want Leaping Horse where you can locate your ugly mouth, though I don't see the pleasure you'll get that way. Anyway, it's good to me. I said I was thro'. Well, I'm thro' listenin' around while others act wise. The bank's mine, an' I'm payin' out the chips. Now I'm dealin' the deck. You an' Jean'll make Leapin' Horse. But instead of a hold-up play fer the cheechako's pokes you can make Jan Pienart, an' set him wise. He's a Dutchman an' a Jew. An' it's a bright combination. You can tell him there's no more trade coming down to him from Whitewater. That Larry Forsyth's been dead two years. An' the only folk who tote the stuff down now is you an'—Jean. Maybe if you're slick he'll see wisdom, an' you can make a deal. An' in makin' that deal you got to locate the nature of the stuff Larry traded. See? Maybe he'll have it by him. Anyway, it's up to you. Does Leaping Horse still look good to you that way?" she finished up, smiling shrewdly.

Dutch wanted to blaspheme with all the unlimited vocabulary of which he was possessed. But he refrained. Instead his wicked eyes widened with a great pretense of astonished admiration.

"Why, say!" he cried. "You're smart, missis! That's one hell of a notion I wouldn't have got in a year! 'Course! Pienart! I never tho't!"

Lola nodded.

"Sure. I didn't reckon you had," she said.

Dutch left his stove and crossed to the desk. He stood gazing from mother to son in the way of a man filled with excited admiration.

"Say, that play's the sort I'd have looked for in Simon," he cried. "It surely is. An' I never—saw it. Pienart! 'Course! He's the feller! He knows the stuff. Must know it. He buys

it, don't he? Gee! See, right here, missis, I guessed you were right down on us folks. An' it hurt. It hurt seein' you pass the rod over that boy of yours, who's put in two men's work since Simon passed. But I get it now. You'd got this back of your head, and were sore the folk you paid hadn't the savvy to get a cinch on it, too. Wall, you're entitled to tell me all you fancy fer missin' a play like that."

Lola's smile remained. Its derision deepened, but that was all. She was not deceived. Dutch's laudatory friendliness, his self-depreciation, were a masking of his feelings. She was perfectly aware that his sudden decision to face the winter trail, which he hated and feared, had meant just—Pienart.

She regarded the man's evil, grinning face. She knew the foulness behind it. But she did not shrink from it, she did not fear it. Simon had used him without hurt. And so could she. Besides, for all the clubbing she had dealt out to Jean, she knew that he was yet the son of Simon. She knew well enough that, in emergency, his physical bulk was not likely to fail her.

She nodded.

"That's all right, Dutch," she said, with studied amiability. "No. It's no time for anyone to quit, I reckon. We've pulled the game blind so far, an' had to fail. Now we'll act with eyes wide. You, an' me, an' Jean, need to be full partners. Equal partners. An' I tell you it's in the biggest stake the North's ever shown the world. Ther' ain't a doubt. Larry didn't lie. Ther' was no bluff. The bank roll he's passed that kid is the sort of thing you can't get away from. But we can't wait. We can't let time go by. We got to be ahead of Andy grown, an' that bunch at the Mission. I figger we got four years an' more to clean up the game. It sounds plenty. But I don't know. Pienart." She shook her head. "It's just one life. An' life's a thing you can't gamble big money on north of sixty. If Simon had been easier we could have got it by now. But Simon wasn't for lettin' other folks into the game. I'm diff'rent. I'm for sharing with you two. An' when we're through I guess ther' won't be need for you to pull the gold poke of a cheechako ever again. Well?"

If the air of the woman's amiability deceived Dutch he gave no sign. He just spat and nodded his flat head.

"You can count me to the limit," he agreed. "An' we'll pull out when the storm eases." Then he turned to Jean, who was again leaning on the desk. "Feelin' good, boy?" he asked in the friendliest tone.

The pale eyes lifted to Dutch's face. They stared for a silent moment. Then they turned to the mother at the desk.

"Guess I'm out to play Maw's hand jest all I know," he said, dully.

And Lola smiled at the Swede, who was frowningly pondering the reply.

CHAPTER IV

DUTCH BECOMES ACTIVE

It took six weeks of strenuous and often blind floundering to bring Dutch Deazel and Jean Duchette to the long-desired high-lights of the gold city of Leaping Horse. Nevertheless, in less than twenty-four hours after their arrival the gunman had contrived to engulf his fifteen-year-old victim in the fœtid welter of a night life such as his own brutish morality regarded as one of the most desirable things in the world.

In his submission to the will of Lola Duchette, Dutch had had a clearly marked purpose in mind. It was a vicious purpose—a purpose that not only satisfied, but stirred in him an ugly sense of humor. Lola had demanded that Jean should make the journey with him. Her reason had been quite clear to the man, and had roused all his antagonism. Well, Dutch had methods peculiar to himself.

Jean was as yet morally clean. He had never in his life looked upon the lights of a northern city. He had never visualized the attractions he might find in a place where men and women foregathered for the purposes of profit and pastime. He knew only the outlands, where Nature was wholesome. So his victimization was the simplest thing in the world to a man who cared nothing for the damage he wrought in pursuit of his own ignoble ends.

There was no doubt or hesitation when they entered the city of lights. Dutch directed, and the dogs were mushed to a low quarter of the town which the man knew by heart, and the while, Jean stared in wonder.

Dutch permitted only time enough to house their outfit and seek out quarters for themselves at a drinking booth called the "Sun-Dog." Then, after cleaning off the worst roughage of the winter trail, and with a stout meal under their belts, he headed the boy for the trail he intended for him. It was out on the tattered fringe of the city—That disreputable fringe without which no new northern gold city seems to be complete.

It was the trail of the "red-lights."

Jean was confronted with the sirens of the red-light world. He was shown women of undoubted beauty gowned to allure. He saw gleaming white, soft, warm flesh, and faces skillfully painted to conceal the ravages of a debased trade, and he fell for them headlong with all the new manhood in him.

There was never a moment of doubt for the man looking on. But, to make doubly sure, Dutch saw to it that the youth drank the last drop of his first rye-highball, and that it was followed up by a second and a third in rapid succession.

When the gunman beheld the lightening of those unexpressive pale eyes, and saw the leering, unaccustomed smile take possession of them, he was content.

Jean's first sleep in Leaping Horse began next morning when breakfast was being served at the "Sun-Dog." It was a drunken, debauched stupor, but alive with vivid dreams. His bemused brain was filled with glittering visions of lights, of fair women, and of the fierce excitements of the new and unexpected life he had so suddenly, so miraculously come upon. After that first night in the gold city nothing in life mattered but the unsavory things it had taught him.

What Dutch lacked in imagination he made up for in active, conscienceless purpose. He had always had a cold sort of friendlieness for the lone son of Simon. But it did not matter. For six weeks, on the trail, he had lived with the boy in close association. He had battled at his side,

with him, and often for him, in a common danger. But in Leaping Horse he was in the element to which he rightly belonged. And his every act was in sheer line with all he had promised himself when he had listened to the scheming of the woman he had learned to resent, and, not a little, to fear.

Jean had to be rendered incapable of interference with his schemes. And the native vice in Dutch had shown him the best way of accomplishing it.

And where better for such a purpose? Leaping Horse, with its long, broad highway, its multitude of lights, its vicious night life, was the newest, the remotest of the northern gold cities. It was rich. It was flooded with a tide of liquid wealth. And it was sufficiently grown to have drained the human dregs from the older of its kind. It was a place where men of Dutch Deazel's type were still accounted citizens rather than outlaws.

Those who had designed Leaping Horse had mapped on broad lines. Unlimited growth had been provided for, and pretty well left at that. In practice, however, it possessed its one indifferently paved highway with its flood of burning electricity. It had just two lines of buildings, ranging from one-roomed cabins to apartment houses, from exclusive, well-stocked stores and offices up to the resplendent "Elysian Fields Hotel" under the unsavory control of the Mexican Jew, Pap Shaunbaum. For the rest, there was the usual litter of remoter buildings on unpaved cross-town streets, and, beyond them, the fringe of habitations reaching out to the low hills which confined the gold valley of its origin.

The best that could be said of Leaping Horse was that it was furiously alive, and was a fascinating lure to the work-weary northerner. It was only in summer, when the world's broadest daylight shone down upon it for twenty-four hours out of every twenty-four that its sham, its hideous drabness, was fully revealed.

But who cared what the light of day might reveal? No one wanted the real Leaping Horse when the sun revealed it. It was just a cruel Gorgon of the Northland, irresistible,

and utterly destructive, but fascinating beyond belief when gazed upon under its myriad of winter lights.

The third day in Leaping Horse found Dutch abroad alone.

It was mid-morning, and he had left the boy, Jean, sleeping off a heavy debauch at the "Sun-Dog." He knew he would sleep on for many hours, in fact, until it was time for the youth to resume his interrupted orgy where the lights burned red, and seductive, painted lips flattered his new-found manhood.

It was a thought that gave Dutch a cynical, smiling satisfaction.

Dutch's way took him into the lower town, the strictly commercial end of the city. This region had none of the flamboyance surrounding the "Elysian Fields." And, as he hurried along over the snow-laden sidewalk, it was almost like a descent into outer darkness. The arc lamps came at longer intervals, and the building lights were reduced to that which shone in store windows, and the even dimmer radiance of those of offices.

But Dutch was unconcerned. He peered out from the depths of his up-turned storm collar looking for his objective. At last he found it.

It was a series of frame buildings. They were of different shapes and sizes, but were knitted together by a high frontage of weather-boarding which extended the entire length of one city block. Here was the city's biggest dry-goods store, and it was presided over by the Dutch Jew, Jan Pienart.

Dutch made no attempt to enter the building by any doorway available to custom. He passed along to the end of the lighted windows, and made his way to the rear of the building. There, he knew from his earlier explorations, was the entrance to Pienart's private offices.

He found it without difficulty—an inconspicuous door beside an archway giving on to a loading yard.

It was a small room, remarkable for its plainness of furnishing. Dutch surveyed it and was stirred to contempt. Jan Pienart he knew to be one of a wealthy city's richest

men, and he had his own ideas of how a rich man should be housed.

The floor was covered by a well-worn carpet that looked many sizes too small for its purpose. There was a single window without hangings. There was a wood-stove radiating heat. There were two or three hard chairs of the Windsor type. The walls were of varnished wood and unadorned, and against one of them a large iron safe bulked clumsily.

But under a single central electric pendant there was a pedestal desk with a small, fair-haired man sitting behind it. He was clean-shaven and almost young. He had large dark eyes, and his nose was high-bridged and rather long and thin. As Dutch gazed at Jan Pienart he thought of the small gray hawks of the northern hills.

The "inquiry" clerk had left Dutch standing facing across the desk, with Jan Pienart's dark eyes raised to his fur-muffled figure. His big body was a little overwhelming in the smallness of the room. As the door closed after the departing clerk Dutch began without any preliminary, and using all the rough effrontery he could summon.

"Say," he blurted, "it's bin six weeks of hell makin' down here from Whitewater. Hell? That don't say a thing. We jest came through blind stormin' days on end. We ——"

"We?"

The trader's brows were raised. And Dutch realized his quickness.

"Sure," he went on, confidently. "Me, an' the dogs. An' I'm still guessin' if it was a right play. You see, Larry Forsyth's a stiff. He's cold an' dead up ther' in the Mission graveyard. An' you're the guy he made trade with. That's why I took a chance on the winter trail. My name's Deazel. Guess your clerk maybe told you. They call me Dutch, for the reason I'm a Swede."

Dutch flung open his coat and pulled off his fur cap. It was as though he were anxious to impress himself upon the man whose interest he had come to enlist. But Jan Pienart gave no sign. He just studied the evil face and flat-backed head as though he were searching for that which it concealed.

Presently he nodded.

"Sure," he said, abstractedly. "Two? Three? Yes, I guess

about three years back. You came around asking questions of my folks who answered the way it suited me."

The trader's voice was coldly even. It was slightly guttural. He reached toward a box of cigarettes, helped himself, lit the cigarette, and sat back in the chair that seemed over-big for him. It was deliberately patent that he offered his visitor no hospitality.

His cold reminder startled Dutch as he watched him blowing smoke. He scented antagonism, and suddenly jerked a hand in the direction of one of the uninviting chairs.

"Can't I sit?" he snapped, viciously. "You ain't ast me."

"If you're—tired."

It was inimitable. And Dutch's gorge rose. Then came the trader's sharp inquiry.

"What's your business?"

Dutch heard it as he swung the chair around and sat on it. Even in his ill-mood he noted the fact that the word "business" sounded to have been spelt with a "p." His wicked eyes flamed.

"Hell!" he rasped. "What kind of a guy are you anyway? I didn't beat those hundreds of miles lookin' to see red carpets fer my feet. An' I don't guess I'm lookin' fer better than a tight-wad Dutch Jew. But I figgered on the sort of manners I ain't heard come amiss even in Leapin' Horse. I ain't yearnin' to sit around, an' I ain't any sort of use for them pimp sticks you're gaspin' at, an' your blasted 'Howdys' somethin' you can ferget. I'm here on a big money-gettin' proposition, an' to put you in on it. But I'm takin' no dirt without one hell of a tough kick. Get that! An' get it good! Then I'll tell you of the millions of dollars we can divide between us, same as if we'd a hill of raw gold with no one around for a thousand miles."

"Big Waters?"

Dutch's bluster was ignored. The slight figure in the chair went on smoking. There was not a shadow of cordiality or interest in Jan Pienart's tone. When Dutch beheld the slow shake of his head, and watched that nose, so like a hawk's beak, move from side to side, he felt as though the bottom of his hopes were dropping out.

"You know—Big Waters?" he jerked out, unguardedly.

"Surely. From the tough picture Larry told me."

Dutch took a grip on himself.

"You're tellin' me things," he sneered.

Jan Pienart sat up. He pinched out his cigarette and dropped it into a cuspidor. Then, with his elbows planted on his desk, he propped his thin face in his hands. His hands were white and tenacious.

"Sure, I'm telling you things," he said, in a tone that marked fierce stirring behind it. "It's up to me. The gunman who chased Larry half across a continent to steal his poke offering me—*me*—millions!" The luminous eyes shone. "Say, I don't like gunmen! And I've no sort of use for 'hold-ups'! You can 'can' your high bluff, Mister Gunman, right there. It'll get you nowhere with me. You've come to me because it was your only chance. Now pull your proposition and I'll listen."

The bull-head in Dutch had visualized Jan Pienart as an easy mark. He knew he was a Dutchman and a Jew. He knew he was a money-getter. And he interpreted that much in his own way. His consideration of the man had stopped short at that.

So far those things were certainly right. But Jan Pienart was much more. In a city which he regarded as a cesspool of human folly and evil he was a wholly clean dealer, a man whose word was rated of higher value than another's bond even by enemies, of whom he had many. Nor was his attitude the result of any supernal virtue. It was simply that he was sickened by the soulless ruthlessness of the life he saw about him, and found his greatest joy in measuring his wits against the trickery, the crookedness he encountered on all hands, and of defeating it honestly.

Dutch took fresh courage at the man's final demand, and hope returned. He obeyed readily and with a fresh access of amiability. He settled himself in his chair, and his manner became expansive.

"See, right here, Mister," he said, with all the breadth he could assume, "I'm not goin' to get sore. This thing's too big to risk that way. Yes, I said millions. An' I mean millions. An' millions we can both handle so they stick. Gee! I want to laff! My one chance, eh? Well, maybe it is—in a

way. But get it, I ain't worried sharin'. I don't have to be. Not with—millions."

The trader remained silent and gazed. His slim fingers were moving in a sort of tattoo against his cheeks.

"Here's the proposition," Dutch went on, flinging eager enthusiasm into the way he leaned forward. "You were glad of your trade with Larry Forsyth. An' you ain't seen it since he got done up. You're a trader first an' last. You buy from the feller selling. I'm selling. You can have that trade agin, bigger—a sight bigger—than ever. An' I'm the feller—the only feller—who can pass it to you. Well?"

"And why should I make trade with you?"

"Because ther' ain't a God-darned soul on earth but me who knows just wher' Larry's 'strike's' located. Big Waters ain't a place. It's a world! I know. An' I can haul the stuff right here for the cash price you paid Larry."

"Do you? Can you?"

Dutch slammed an impatient fist on the flat top of the desk.

"God A'mighty, I'm tellin' you," he roared.

Jan Pienart sat back in his chair, carrying a fresh, unlighted cigarette with him. He thrust it in the corner of his mouth.

"You're lying and bluffing," he said, lighting it. "You can't hand me that trade. You can't haul it. And you know it. Take a big think. You don't know the stuff. You wouldn't know it with it pushed under your nose. And that's why you put in six weeks of hell on the winter trail. For that reason and no other. No, Mister Gunman, cut out the frills. Keep 'em for suckers. I'm a business man. Not the other sort."

Jan Pienart smiled. But it was at sight of the flame in the other's hot eyes. He waited for the storm to break, luxuriously inhaling his cigarette. But it did not. He saw the big, unwashed throat swallow and read the sign of it. Dutch scowled down at the open drawer in the desk upon the edge of which the trader's right hand was resting. And he spoke with the sulky viciousness of a beaten man.

"God blast you, that's so," he snarled. "Tcha! Have it your way! Yes. That's what's drove me to six week's hell on the trail. It ain't any sort of love brought me to a Dutch

Jew trader. Not by a lot. Tell me the name of the stuff. How it looks. An' I can pull the goods. Fifty-fifty. That's what I need. An' I'll haul the trade till this miser'ble territory freezes my marrer so a bitch wolf couldn't chew it. You can't do without me. An' I can't do without you. It's pardners. Now, come clean."

The gunman's eyes bored with an anxiety too big for him to hide. He was sitting forward, leaning toward the desk. Suddenly he laughed like the snarl of a jackal.

"Hell! What's the use? We got to get together. Forsyth didn't lie. Millions! It's his word. That's my cards set right out on your bloody table. Ther' ain't no stackin'. That's my sworn word."

Jan Pienart nodded, blowing a cloud of smoke.

"Sure. The word of a gunman who meant to rob Larry, and would have shot him to eternity when it suited him."

Suddenly the trader started forward in his chair. He flung his half-burned cigarette on the floor with a vicious gesture, and his hand gripped the drawer that gaped wide open from the desk.

"I told you you were lying and bluffing," he cried, his words coming with a rush, his luminous eyes hotly compelling. "You're still lying! Your miserable cards are stacked. And they're stacked so clumsily I could laugh! Oh, they're not stacked against me. You couldn't do it. You would. But you can't. They're stacked against a dead Larry who was my very, very good friend. You guess he's dead, and out of the game. I tell you he's still sitting in! He's sitting in with me playing the hand your bunch made impossible to him.

"Now here's something for you to get. And to get good," he went on, after a moment's pause. "I know all about Larry and his family. And all he figured to do for them. I know all about you, and the rest of your gang, and all you were crazy to do to that boy. I know all about his treasure, and Big Waters, and just where all the stuff he's left behind him is lying. And all that I know from Larry's own lips. Well, your bunch did Larry up. And to me it looks like someone lost his nerve. It was a wanton shooting that didn't

give you a thing, and left you without any hope except—me. So that even in that Larry pulled his game on you."

He withdrew his hand from the desk drawer and Dutch started as he saw that it was holding an automatic that looked sizes too big for it.

"Now, here's where you get off. Where we both get off," Pienart went on, sharply, his eyes shining with cold, implacable irony. "Larry's still playing that game, only he's set a bright, red-head kid into it. It's all your outfit left for him to do. He isn't here to guide the kid's play. But I am. And so is another. And we're going to see his boy gets all that's coming to him. There's no fifty-fifty in any millions of Larry's between you and me. Only between me and his red-head kid. I want my trade. I want it all. But not from you. Only from that kid. I've got to wait years. I can wait. I will wait. And if you're looking to jump in on us you'll have to wait, too. But, right here, I promise you if that boy's interfered with, or hurt meanwhile, you'll get yours—all of it! And I promise you when the time comes I'll raise every hell I know to see you never touch a cent of Larry's treasure at Big Waters as long as you're allowed to live!"

He suddenly flung up his hand, pointing at the door with the muzzle of his gun.

"Now beat it! And don't dally around! Don't stop to ask fool questions. It's not healthy. And when you quit see you salve that poor darn kid of Simon Duchette's from the muck hell you've dumped him into while you double-cross his mother!"

CHAPTER V

MARY REALIZES HER WOMANHOOD

THE calm of life at Lake Whitewater was apparently unruffled. Time seemed to have brought it a peace it had not known during the years of Larry Forsyth's comings and goings.

Year after year the work of Father Dan's Mission went forward. It went on uninterruptedly under the urge of the

priest's undemonstrative determination. Indians and Eskimos foregathered from their hunting grounds in ever-growing numbers. They came with their spoils, made trade at the Fort, and finally sought the Mission as though drawn thither by some powerful magnet. And perhaps they were, for none came without finding Father Dan's unstinting generosity awaiting them.

They attended his simple instructional classes. They made pretense of learning things wholly unnecessary in their hardy, self-reliant lives. And they did it all with as much readiness as though the whole thing were pleasurable entertainment. Then their bodily ailments—it was amazing how these stout-hearted, sturdy-bodied creatures suffered ailments of the flesh. There seemed no limit to the variety of them. And Father Dan treated them with due seriousness. He knew the native love of medical attention. And his one profound concern was to encourage and keep his dusky flock.

The kindly tyrant, Jane Hesther, however, was made of rougher stuff. She spurned these malingerers. In her jealous mind they were a greedy pack of ravening wolves taking advantage of the kindly white man whom she regarded as her especial property and care.

In consequence, the patient Oolinak was forced to endure a tide of voluble grievances which Jane Hesther felt that life inflicted only for her especial distraction. She hurled her complaint at him with a gift of tempestuousness that would have broken down the tacit resistance of a lesser patience. But Oolinak had the care of his Mission kyaks. He had the care of his sleds and his dogs. But, far more satisfying and supporting, he had the white girl, Mary, whom he adored with a devotion that was something dog-like.

And Mary? Mary just grew in stature, in well-being, in mind, and in her woman's beauty. She went about her life with the same quiet deliberateness which had been hers since earliest childhood. Nor was there abatement in her impish humor. She seemed to live only for the trail—that trail that was in her blood from the two wanderers on the plateau of Unaga, that trail which she and Andy had always visualized and planned for together. Whether by water in summer, or at the tail of her dog-sled, which, with Oolinak, she

mushed through storm or fine in the dark of winter's night, it made no difference. Mary was forever reaching out to the far places on any and every excuse.

And Father Dan just looked on. He feared for her in what he believed to be the physical weakness of her sex, and chided himself unsparingly that he permitted her to face the bitter hardship of work that taxed even his stout manhood. But he found himself powerless. He loved the child and could deny her nothing her heart was set upon. And, so far as he could see, Mary's happy, confident, willful mind was full of dreams of her dogs, her sleds, and the racing open waters of summertime.

There were hours, long, troubled hours, when he sat alone in his Mission, crouched for warmth over his fire, awaiting her return from days and nights on the winter trail with Oolinak. He just sat there hearkening to the desperate voice of winter outside the hut, yearning for the sight of the girl's glowing, storm-kissed cheeks; yearning to hear again the gurgling chuckle of a tall, strong, straight-limbed creature whose spirit always seemed to be bubbling happily within her, the while he reminded himself that she was doing his work and sharing his burden—that, well-nigh blinded in a cold that was far below zero, he was permitting her to risk her precious life for him.

It filled him with anxiety and contrition. But, deep in his secret heart, there shone a great light of pride and admiration, and parental love for the splendid, self-sacrificing youth of it all, its abounding generosity.

The passing of those years for Father Dan was an interim of quiet happiness. It was the happiness of a big spirit that sees its life's work going steadily forward along the considered lines set out for it, while, at the same time, its humanity is satisfied by the delight of witnessing the development of the youthful life for which it feels entirely responsible. But he knew it was only an interim. Not even in his happiest moments was he blinded to the loom of a far-flung, threatening horizon.

Father Dan had marked every movement at the old Fort since he had become the guardian of Larry's secret. He had seen Lola's son depart with the egregious gunman for

Leaping Horse, and it had promptly bestirred misgiving. It was the first real move of the enemy, and it set his keen mind searching busily. What was the reason for such a trip in winter? And his conclusion came on the instant: the only possible interest Leaping Horse could hold for these two was—Larry's trade.

It was a straw in the wind, and, so, his misgiving. Then his misgiving further deepened, when, at last, they returned, and he discovered that Dutch Deazel had become permanently absorbed into Lola's queer household. Yes, these years, that slipped away so rapidly and so peacefully, were only a happy interim.

But whatever murk underlaid the outward peace of the Fort it was never permitted to reveal itself except in the ugly trade which Lola pursued with such avidity. She still used the methods of the days of Simon. It was liquor, raw, devastating liquor, and downright robbery developed into unworthy art.

It was the old thorn stabbing into Father Dan's side. But he endured it. He was in that condition of mind when the girl and the boy under his care were infinitely more to him than the work that had always claimed him. He would readily have protested, he would willingly have called police aid. But policy overruled him. He was quite unafraid, but he knew that Lola and Dutch, and Jean, now grown into the image of his ruthless father, were only waiting. That journey to Leaping Horse had failed to serve them. And they were waiting.

They were waiting for the coming of Andy. They were waiting for that ultimate move when Andy, full-grown, and full-learned, should come from his college to seek that ominous legacy which his father had bequeathed to him. When that time came, he knew the storm would break. And when it broke, he felt that the war which those three at the Fort would wage would be all that had gone before a hundred per cent intensified. Lola would see to that.

Father Dan viewed the future philosophically. But with the passing of the years he grew less happy, less confident in a direction in which he felt he had no right to be so la-

mentably troubled. It was in Mary's continued association with the hulking, nineteen-year-old youth, Jean.

At something over seventeen Mary was a girl of vital attraction. She had gone far beyond any promise of early youth. The hardy life she lived, the strenuous labor of the trail, the constant battle with the elements in which she engaged herself, all had built her into not only a glorious physical development but a creature of unusual mental qualities. Then there was her happy humor which had kept pace with all the rest, and a perfect oval of face lit by eyes that might well have ravished an image of brass.

Therein lay Father Dan's anxiety. He had no doubt of the girl. Mary's detestation of Jean would remain. He felt she was of a character and purpose that nothing could change, nothing could deflect. But the campaign upon which she had willfully embarked in the service of her absent playmate was one of frank, sexual encouragement.

Father Dan realized his powerlessness. He had warned. He had even protested. And Mary had remained smilingly, gently adamant. Nor was he likely to forget the last time he had endeavored to persuade her. The girl had told him frankly how alive she was to the rightness of his warning. But she had shown him a side of her character such as he had only vaguely realized before.

"Daddy, darling," she had smiled up at him, with that patience which seemed quite inexhaustible, "I know I'm on the edge of a bad, burning, ugly volcano. Everything you're trying to tell me is real an' true. It's so true there's times I get scary like any kid. Jean isn't human. He's a vicious, cruel tiger, and the beast is in him. I know. And no one can tell me better than I can see for myself. But till Andy comes along back to us we're all on the edge of that bad old volcano. And when he gets here it's goin' to blow right up anyway, and we'll all be scrapping our way out, or trying to. Well, the nearer I sit around to that volcano the more I'll get to know of it. And if I get caught up in it before Andy gets here I'll have learned all there is to know, and I'll be there for Andy to—help him. You know, Daddy, Andy's the whole of my foolish world. Maybe right down East there he'll find things to make him forget me.

It don't make any sort of diff'rence, except—except —— Psha! I love his red head better than I love anything else in the world. Better—better—oh, altogether diff'rent to the way I love your gray one. And if there's a single thing I can do to help him to get those millions his father left for him he's going to get the last cent of 'em. I'll just take every chance—if it's for Andy!"

The hum of winged insects was almost musical. The billowing white clouds of fine weather were drifting across the sky. A precious breeze blew coolingly and made the heat tolerable.

Flood-water was still streaming down the river and emptying itself into the lake beyond. But the last ice-floe had vanished weeks ago and summer had leaped upon the world.

Mary was down at the water's edge. She was squatting on a bowlder talking to her beloved Benjie, now full of maturity and a wealth of canine understanding. His great muzzle was resting between her tightly pressed, breeched knees, and her strong brown hands were caressing his upstanding ears. Squatting about her, begging for notice, were six other rough-coated savages. They eyed their privileged leader with disgusted, envious respect. When Benjie was on hand their chances of notice by their mistress were small enough.

"You know, Benjie, my wonderful, you're getting awful old," the girl smiled, with a shake of a pretty head which was lost beneath the cloth-visored cap which entirely concealed the mass of her tightly knotted hair. "I don't know if you'll last till he comes. I sure don't. How old are you? Let's see. He's been gone six summers. And you were one, was it? when he went South. Sure, old man. You must be all of seven. Look at those nasty gray hairs on your ugly nose! Those!" And her fingers gently tugged at two tufts of gray showing amid the dark of the beast's wolfish muzzle. "They're nasty, ugly milestones, and I've a mind to cut them out and—and forget. You see, I want you to lead the team when he comes. 'Cos it'll be tough, I guess. And you like it tough best. When d'you think he'll come? Will you know his red head again? Or—or are you color-blind?

Oh, I guess you'll know him! You'll *have* to! If you don't jump all over him for welcome, I—I think I'd want to kill you."

The girl looked up and her big blue eyes gazed thoughtfully over at the Mission landing a few yards away where Oolinak was busy setting a new hide bottom to the two-man kyak which was Mary's especial craft. She watched the man's squat figure as he moved about the up-turned boat. But she was not interested. Her thought was miles away. Hundreds of miles. And at that moment her boat was quite forgotten.

A restless, impatient movement of the dog's head reclaimed her wandering attention.

"Let's figger," she cried, suddenly, with a little laugh.

She ceased caressing Benjie and clipped her fingers. In an instant there was a canine crush struggling for place at her knees. She held up a warning hand, and in a moment there was vital quiet with seven pairs of baleful eyes watching her for a further sign.

"Now we'll work it out. I wonder if you crazy things can do sums? Maybe you can't. Maybe you don't have to. Maybe you know without figgering. Now when'll he come along back? Now you first, Benjie, 'cos you're leader!"

There was instant response. Benjie pawed the soft buckskin of her breeches. She laughed softly and shook her head.

"That's no sort of use at all. Here, I'll tell you all. One more year! Daddy Dan says before he's twenty-one. Just think of Andy being twenty-one. That kid with his fool red hair! And he'll come back a—man. A big, tall man! All muscle, and—and grit. Yes, and knowledge, too! Fancy Andy knowing things! He will, though—ever so much. More than me. Oh, I'll be just all sorts of a fool to him. Now that's this summer, next winter, then summer again, and then—Andy. Yes, he'll have to get here before the freeze-up. Else he'll need to wait till the ice goes. Oh, dear. I hope he won't be—be late. My! Before the freeze-up—next year!"

The dogs crowded with jaws agape and lolling, slavering tongues. They were watching that happy, smiling face whose laughter was always in the depths of its big eyes. And if they understood they gave no sign. Mary was their little

human god. And her smile was all they desired. Her smile and her caresses.

Suddenly she stood up tall and slim in her stout buckskin. It was in response to an inarticulate grunt from the man at the boat. Oolinak, like the dogs, needed her.

The dogs scattered as she moved. And they followed behind her and squatted again waiting for further favors while she stood on the swaying landing in consultation with the Eskimo.

"Him wonnerful mush plenty good," Oolinak pointed down at the thick hide stretched like a drum over the kyak's bottom. "Us mak 'em thro'. Us all same mak 'em mush big trip. Oh, yes. Him good lak all sort. Oolinak wonnerful feller. Yes!"

Mary smiled at the complacent, grinning face that was like squeezed rubber.

"You're surely wonderful, Oolinak," she agreed, readily. "And I'll have to tell Jane Hesther that's so. Then she won't call you 'dam-fool man' ever any more. We're going one big trip. Whispering Lake. Big Waters. I got to know them both before Andy comes."

The Eskimo's smile died abruptly. His eyes rolled and his heavy head shook negatively.

"Us not mak 'em Big Water. No." His tone was awed, his manner apprehensive. "Good Boss him say not, never. Him say Oolinak bad feller mak Big Water."

Mary laid a firm hand on the man's broad shoulder. It was a gesture more compelling than she knew.

"Don't worry, Oolinak," she smiled, as though encouraging a child. "When we make Big Waters it'll be because good Boss says 'Yes.'"

The man's smile was re-born. And Mary turned abruptly and gazed down the river.

It was a kyak—a low, long craft that looked sizes too light for the bulk of the man who was driving it up against the swollen river. It was Jean Duchette. And he was making for the Mission landing.

The girl stood watching the boat's progress for some moments. Then mischief took possession of her. She moved off the landing and hurried away up-river with her dogs

leaping at her heels. Benjie, alone, moved sedately at her side.

Mary reached a point on the foreshore well-screened from observation at the Mission. It was a rocky outcrop that stood up high from the general level. It was a sort of groin, thrusting out into the river, whose obstruction churned the swift waters into violent eddies.

She considered it for some moments. Then, with a whimsical smile, she climbed to its highest point and seated herself. With her dogs crowding about her she sat gazing out in the direction whence she knew Jean's kyak would presently appear. Mary had methods peculiar to herself.

In due course the kyak rounded the river bend. But hardly had it done so, and Jean had discovered the girl on the rocks, than his boat swung across the stream and headed for the hither bank. The man stepped ashore and picked his way along the bank, thus avoiding the churning waters.

Mary watched him approach, and she realized how big he was—how massively muscular and even threatening. She found herself wondering what he would be like now in one of those fights he used to have with Andy. Would it end as it always had ended in Jean's discomfiture? Or—she glanced down at her dogs, and somehow she felt glad of their presence.

Jean came up. He leaped on to the granite outcrop, and came to a halt just beyond the circle of sprawling dogs that surrounded her.

"You can't fool me that way," was his greeting.

It came in the sneering tone that was his expression of humor. He pointed back at the swirling waters among the upstanding rocks below them.

Mary's manner was calmly bland.

"That's so," she admitted. "It takes a right smart river man to face up to stuff like that. You're best afoot. It's—safer!"

"Tcha!"

Jean hunched his big shoulders under his cotton store shirt. Then his stained hands were thrust into the top of

his cord breeches, and his pale eyes stared down at his tormenter.

"Sure it's safer," he agreed, after awhile, his angry impatience gone from a tone which had returned to its customary surliness. "When a woman lets meanness get away with her you got to cut her claws as you would a bitch snow fox you reckon to tame. I ain't bumpin' rocks to hand you a laff. You saw me beatin' up-river. You could have waited around."

Mary fondled Benjie and replied without looking up.

"Sure," she nodded. "But I didn't. I beat it here because I reckoned you'd be scared to face those waters. I was right. What for do you come around where you're not wanted?"

There was instant effect. Mary saw the sudden stiffening of the big body. It was as though an electric current had shot through it. The cold eyes had come to life, too. They were passionately alight. It was the fierce glow to be seen in the eyes of an animal driven by savage emotion. Mary saw the change as unbeautiful, something insensate.

"Because I wanted!"

It was violent. It came furiously harsh.

Then Mary saw the big throat swallow. And she knew Jean was choking back that reckless temper she had come to know so well. With her hands caressing her dogs she watched. And as she did so she became aware of the brutish appraisement to which the pale eyes were submitting her body.

Suddenly Jean gestured.

"I've stood for your foolin' years," he suddenly exploded. "An' I ain't standin' fer no more. No. When a gal gets a woman, an' a boy gets a man ther' ain't room fer that truck. I bunched around your trail years. An' I'm still hot on it fer all you ain't better'n a she wolf. It wouldn't be that way if I'd the sense of a rabbit. But I ain't. No. Not with you around. I don't guess ther's a thing right up to a killin' I wouldn't hand out if you said. An' it sets me mad that's so. Well, you got to know about it, now, an' you best know it all. I ast you as a kid. I ast you when you'd grown to a slip of a girl with no better shape than a saplin' pole.

Now you're a woman I'm goin' to have a right answer here an' now. You got to play squar'. I won't stand fer less. It's all doped out clear. Father Dan can fix us reg'lar. An' Maw figgers our trade's good to keep us, an' the kids you'll raise to me. You won't have a kick comin'. Not a kick. You'll eat better with us than at the Mission. An' you can get all the truck you fancy fer swell dressin'. I'm crazy mad fer you. An' when Maw packs the long trail the trade'll be all ours. Same as it was Paw's an' Maw's. You got to say right now. An' we're thro' foolin'. How?"

It was human passion, raw, brutal, but real. The hard expressionless voice, the cold, pale eyes—these meant nothing. The man was a living volcano of animal lust.

Mary understood. She was thinking all through his harangue. She was thinking at a speed that carried her swiftly to her set purpose. She shook her fur-capped head from side to side.

"Do you figure I'm going to live around all my life where there's no better than Eskimos, and sow-belly, and the long winter trail?" she asked, coolly.

The eyes that gazed up at the man had neither mischief nor humor in them. They were serious. They were kindly. And behind them lay purpose.

"It's no sort of use, Jean," she went on, almost gently. "I want more out of life than that. Much more. I've loved it all here with Daddy Dan and you folks. But then I was a kid and didn't know better. I want more than you can give me. There's another world than this. You've pulled your proposition and I wouldn't be a woman if I wasn't grateful to you. But it don't attract me. Not a bit. I want the life only big money can buy. I want ——"

"An' who says I can't hand you that?" Jean broke in with passionate vehemence.

"I do," Mary nodded provocatively. "Your trade's good. But it's not big money. Daddy Dan says that. He knows."

The man eyed her. The blank stare of his pale eyes told nothing. But he was thinking furiously. Of a sudden he flung out his hands. And it was a gesture of yielding to an impulse that was too strong for him.

"You don't have to worry for that trade," he cried,

caught in the fires the girl had lit for him and stirred purposely. "You'll get the big money in plenty. Hell! Do you think I'm the sort to stand around lookin' when ther's money by the ton? Do you guess Maw's got no guts to her when she can help herself plenty? An' Dutch! Do you reckon he's stoppin' around for joy of our company? We got it all set out. An' I guess ther's been no blunder this time ——"

Suddenly he bent down, crouching the better to peer with his eyes into the up-turned, expectant face.

"Get this. An' get it good," he said, in a tone that sent a quick shudder through the girl's slim body. "One time, when that red-head gets along back to chase up the millions he guesses are waitin' for him, he'll find Big Waters empty! Stark cleaned out! Empty of every darn thing but its fool water, an' the crazy birds that don't know better than to foul the rocks they nest on. Now will you say it? You want that big money. Well, you can have it—with me."

The girl's shudder had passed. There was a sparkle in the eyes that promptly smiled back into the evil of the man's. She had drawn him as she intended. And she had learned all she felt there was to learn, but she gave no sign.

"No," she said, quietly, "with big money or without it I don't need you. I just wouldn't marry you if there wasn't better than dead fish left anywhere on the earth."

Mary stood up. She waited for nothing. She moved down the granite rocks with her dogs about her. It was an escort of defense that would obey her lightest command.

CHAPTER VI

MARY REVEALS HERSELF

Mary set out for home. Her going was hasty, even something precipitate. There was no backward glance, or a single word of farewell. She just went, tall and gracefully slim in the hide breeches and close-fitting shirt of buckskin she wore. There was a light in her big eyes and a flush in her oval cheeks. And, with her dogs leaping about her heels, she made her way over the rocky foreshore as though the man she had left behind her had no existence whatever.

Jean Duchette remained staring after her from the top of the rocks. Never had the pale eyes of him looked colder, harder, or more merciless in their cruelty.

If Mary were indifferent to that which she had left behind her, thought was busy on that final hectoring, malicious, triumphant announcement to which she had listened. It was the triumph in Jean's tone that had most impressed her, and left her wondering and uneasy.

" 'One time, when that red-head gets along back to chase up the millions he guesses are waitin' fer him, he'll find Big Waters empty! Stark cleaned out! Empty of every darn thing but its fool water, an' the crazy birds that don't know better than to foul the rocks they nest on.' "

Was it the truth?

Through all her young life Mary had made Andy the sun of her simple worship. She had endowed him with every heroic quality that her romantic mind could invent. His vivid head, his amazing freckles, his laughing blue eyes—these things claimed all the woman in her, and ardently satisfied. Even in his long absence they formed a mental companionship almost comparable with his bodily presence. Mary had no thought of any future that could be unshared with Andy. And, in her generous impulse, she wanted the whole world for him. She made no pretense even to herself. She was stark in her downrightness. All he desired must be for Andy. And only for herself she asked the—to her—divine slavery of being the Eve of his Adam.

If Jean's claim were true then all Mary's six years of planning had gone for nothing! The great adventure for which she had so laboriously prepared herself would never be hers! All her dreams, all her hopes, all that which had gone to make life a glorious looking-forward in Andy's absence, would be as completely washed out as though an overwhelming freshet had bored its way down Flood River and swept Big Waters, and all it meant to Andy and herself, completely out of existence.

On the other hand, his claim was possibly a crude bluff whereby Jean had hoped to win his way with her.

Mary kept an open mind. She felt it would be useless as yet to accept either the one explanation or the other. She

knew too well of the ceaseless activities of those at the Fort during the years of Andy's absence. She knew that Big Waters had been traversed and explored from end to end. There had been scarcely any respite. Then there had been that significant winter trail to Leaping Horse. Jean's claim might well enough be the truth, but Mary, with that cool decision so essentially hers, had no intention of accepting such a conclusion until it was proven.

Mary reached the buildings of the Mission quickly. At the closed door of the schoolhouse she paused and listened while her eager dogs snuffed at its foot. Then she went on. She had assured herself of Father Dan's deep tones addressing his dusky pupils and she was satisfied. He would remain with them until the hour of the mid-day meal.

But as she approached her destination, and glanced down at the landing where she had left Oolinak at work, there came a swift change in her thoughtful expression. Her even brows drew sharply, and her pretty lips tightened in a manner that disturbed the smooth oval of her cheeks.

Oolinak was no longer there. He had finished his work, and her kyak was lying in the water straining violently at its moorings under pressure of the flooded stream. The sight of that lone, waiting craft, and all it signified, gave her a pathetic moment of dismay. She wondered if it would be wanted after all.

But, as swiftly as it had come, her dismay passed, merged into a smile of humor. It was the sight of Jane Hesther. The Eskimo's adipose waddle was irresistible. She had just emerged from her kitchen and was trundling up the incline in the direction of her wood-store. It was a grotesque vision—more than usually so, for the woman's fat arms were flailing the air in a vain defense against the swarms of pursuing flies, and invective flowed from her in the wanton abundance of the two languages she had at her command.

Mary changed her mind. She, too, moved up in the direction of the fuel store.

It was the remains of an old-time hut backing into the fringe of woods lining the river bank. It was badly decayed and quite beyond repair. Its lateral log walls were leaning

perilously, and its roof was agape in many places. It was a hut of three rooms, one behind the other, and all communicating with openings whose doors had long since disappeared.

Mary found Jane Hesther in the first of the three rooms. Her big black eyes were rolling ominously as she surveyed a hopeless litter of freshly hewn cordwood, which had been carelessly flung into the building and left where it had fallen. The woman's arms were truculently akimbo. And her fiercely clenched fists were digging heavily into the region where her waist should have been.

Mary understood. Jane Hesther was bursting with indignation—indignation directed at the devoted Oolinak. Oolinak had failed to stack his wood with due regard for its precious nature. And he had failed to do so in favor of the work Mary had demanded on her kyak.

The Eskimo's verbal indignation broke out the moment Mary joined her, and the girl's own worries were instantly forgotten.

"Him all sort no good all time," Jane Hesther cried, with a ferocity that sounded so threatening and meant so little. "Him lazy lak him gray wolf with him belly full. Us pay him, him dam-fool feller. Jane Hesther, us mak work all time plenty all sort. Good boss us mak fool Neche well lak all thing plenty. Mar-ee all time mak lak him good Boss say. Dam-fool Eskimo no good mak nothin' no feller want not never. Him lak Neche man no good. Us kill him, him Oolinak, plenty quick. Us kill him all up, an' mak him plenty eat good dog Benjie. Yes."

"Poor Oolinak!" Mary laughed. "And poor—Benjie!" She linked an arm through one of the Eskimo's and squeezed it. "It's all my doing, Jane Hesther. I told him. I said he was to pitch the wood under cover, an' get after my kyak. So ——"

"So. Us not kill 'em. Benjie not mak sick dog eatin'!"

Jane Hesther turned big beaming eyes on Mary. All her wrath against Oolinak had miraculously evaporated.

"Him mush tough Eskimo," she went on, grinning happily. "Yes. Mar-ee want him dis dam-fool man. Mush good. Us tak plenty wood mak fire. Cook 'em eat. So."

The black eyes surveyed the litter and finally came back to the girl's face, which was still smiling.

"Mar-ee mak 'em long trail bimeby? Yes?" she questioned.

But Mary made no reply. Having saved Oolinak from Jane Hesther's wrath she released the stout arm and clambered over the wood to the inner rooms. There was no litter there. The inner rooms were as neat and full of precious winter fuel as Oolinak's patient hands could make them.

Jane Hesther had followed. And she stood surveying the handiwork of her man with as much complaisance as though it were her own. But no verbal expression of approval was forthcoming. It seemed as though she recognized only blame as being Oolinak's rightful due.

Suddenly Mary pointed at a darkened corner of the innermost room. It was a corner left clear of the stacked fuel. And it was occupied by a great lashed bundle, ominous in its blackness and prolonged shape.

"What's that?" she asked, sharply. "That! All tied up with—rope. There! That black bunch that looks like it's some dead ——"

But the girl's sentence remained unfinished. A sharp, inarticulate ejaculation broke from Jean Hesther, immediately behind her, and Mary turned. She discovered a pair of troubled eyes goggling at her. Thousands of years of foolish superstition were looking out of them.

"For goodness' sake!"

Mary's exclamation was half impatient, half amused.

"All 'em dead Boss Larry," Jane Hesther said, in an awed tone, wagging her flat head in the direction of the bundle. "Dead man outfit! Yes. All 'em mush bad spirit. Mar-ee look 'em plenty. Bad spirit get 'em Mar-ee quick. Kill 'em up dead, same lak. Oh, yes. Jane Hesther burn all up quick, mak plenty fire. Then 'em bad spirit all mak fly 'way."

The Eskimo's foolishness left Mary uninterested, and she turned again to the ominous bundle. Of course; now she remembered it. It was the lashed bundle of Andy's father's outfit, which Father Dan and the policeman had salved from the corroding waters of Silt Lake. It had been flung into the fuel store because it contained only Larry's stock

of driftwood which might be useful for firing. It had lain there for six years, and no one had used it.

Suddenly Mary bethought her of Andy, and she turned quickly on Jane Hesther, who had edged away backwards toward the door through which they had entered the room.

Mary shook her head with cold decision.

"You won't touch it, Jane Hesther," she ordered. "That lies right there till Andy gets along back. You're a crazy thing if you guess there's bad spirits to it. There aren't. There wasn't anything bad to Andy's father. So there couldn't be. And, anyway, it's been there six years and no harm's come to anyone. That's Andy's. An' I guess it's going to be his when he gets along back—next year."

"Him not come never," Jane Hesther grumbled, her restless feet carrying her still farther away from the dread bundle.

Mary's eyes lit. They widened too. And there was more than impatience in the reply that snapped from her pretty lips.

"He will come!" she cried. "He'll—he'll come next year! Don't you dare say he won't, you wicked, wicked Eskimo."

"I tell us quick," Jane Hesther retorted. "Him bad spirit mak 'em not come never. Him shoo him 'way plenty. Us burn 'em, maybe he come. So. Us burn 'em?"

"Not on your life!" Mary cried, passionately. "It's—his! You understand, Jane Hesther? If you touch that outfit, if you so much as move it, I'll have Father Dan send you right back to your folks, and I'll never see you again—ever. Now beat it back to your foolish kitchen, and burn up your bad spirits making our food. I—I'm angry with you. I ——"

But Mary's anger abruptly lost itself in a pealing laugh of delighted mischief. Jane Hesther's feet had contacted with the wood-pile littering the front room. There was a stumble, a struggle to save herself from falling. Then, with a heavy bump, the woman was sprawled on her broad back like some giant up-turned beetle. Mary laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks as she surveyed the vision of helplessly waving arms and legs, and the unseemly display of bare dusky flesh. Then she dashed to the rescue.

"Oh, Jane Hesther, if you could only get a peek at yourself!" she cried, seizing one fat hand and hauling with all her strength. "My," she cried, still laughing. "Now, roll over! Roll toward me, you foolish, old, superstitious silly! That's it! Now, steady! Get a real footing. Up! Careful! There! That's your bad spirits did that. You watch 'em. Now beat it quick, or they'll get you! Quick! Your kitchen, where you're safe! Just cook like anything! There's no bad spirit could stand for the food *you* cook!"

There was no need for Mary's urge. Once safely on her fat feet again Jane Hesther became a furious expression of panic-stricken energy. With amazing presence of mind, however, she snatched up an armful of wood, and, with incredible agility, fled from the spirit-haunted place.

Mary looked after the waddling figure now moving at a trot that shook it like a jelly. But for once her humor failed her. She felt she had been hard, even brutal to the devoted old creature. Jane Hesther was only a benighted, untutored Eskimo with a heart of gold shining amid the fog of native superstitions.

The girl sighed and went back to the inner room, and gazed down yearningly at the bundle she meant to preserve for Andy.

She considered it for some inactive moments. Then she stooped and felt its lashings. She pressed her fingers on the rubber sheet. It was stiff. And it broke under her pressure crumbling like a thin layer of dry plaster. Then she stood up again.

For a long time she eyed that pathetic relic of Andy's reckless father. Then, at last, she yielded to irresistible impulse. She reached around to her hip and withdrew a long, keen sheath-knife that had once been Oolinak's most treasured possession. Then, dropping on to her knees, she slashed at the lashings.

It was a task by no means to Mary's taste. She had scorned Jane Hesther's superstitions. She had ridiculed the woman. Yet somehow, as she cut at the thongs, she, herself, was a prey to a sensation of nerves such as she had never known before. She worked with unnecessary haste,

and, in a few moments, knelt gazing down at nothing more alarming than a mass of driftwood such as she herself might have gleaned on her own river trips.

There was intense relief in the sight. But there was a tinge of regret that the sinister bundle contained nothing of greater interest. Then, of a sudden, the girl's acute mind prompted a question.

Mary was young in years, but old in the life of the far, northern world. She had learned the trail under Oolinak, and she knew it through the native mind which is beyond words in its understanding of such things. And out of her learning had leaped a question that had never occurred to Simon Duchette, or to Dutch Deazel, and not even to the policeman, Spence, whose mind was trained to his service.

Why had Larry Forsyth burdened himself with such a weight of driftwood for his camp-fires on a journey through a wooded country on his way to Leaping Horse? North to Big Waters—yes. It was through lands as barren as the Arctic seas. Back from Big Waters to Whitewater—yes. But the Mackenzie Valley, the far western wooded foothills, wherein Leaping Horse was set, there was wood—wood all the way—wood in abundance.

CHAPTER VII

MARY PLANS THE GREAT ADVENTURE

Mary was lounging in the open doorway. She was gazing far out across the streaming river at the unbroken line of the southern horizon. It was sharp, and amazingly clear under the evening sunlight, which was flooding the world out of a cloudless summer sky.

Father Dan looked up from his book. He was squatting on his sturdy, if comfortless stool, just back from the doorway where the full light fell upon the pages of his reading. He considered the girl's slim, mannish figure, and his eyes were alight with a twinkling of amused understanding.

There was something very purposeful, very practical in that graceful, leaning figure. Mary was clad in stout hide

breeches whose cut was her own designing. And her knee-boots, of walrus-hide, had all Oolinak's skill in their making. Then the cotton shirt which was her only upper garment was similar to those used in Indian trade at the old Fort. The mass of her waistlong, fair hair was tightly coiled up on her head and completely concealed under her old worn fur cap.

Watching her, Father Dan's smile deepened as the thought occurred to him that only a pipe or a cigarette, and the blowing of smoke, were needed to complete the illusion of young manhood. He knew the whole thing was quite deliberate. He had watched its development as the girl had grown. She seemed obsessed with a quaint yearning to camouflage her sex.

There were times when Father Dan doubted the wisdom of the up-bringing he had afforded Mary. He had loved the child with all that was parental in him. He had cared for her at infinite pains for her well-being. Then he had taught her with all his own limited scholarship, and out of the ripeness of his understanding of the stern life they both lived. But he had brought her up "hard." He had brought her up to self-reliance. And in that he felt he was not a little responsible for the mannishness that had resulted.

Had he been right? All he knew was that he would far rather have seen Mary clad in the unhelpful garments common to her sex, and to have seen her wonderful hair braided and dressed with all the little arts belonging to woman. But he knew that such things would have been anachronisms in the circumstances of Mary's life. There was only one thing for those who belonged to the outlands. They must be equipped to fend their lives in a world where only the fit, the strong, could hope to survive.

Well, Mary was so equipped.

"Is there need for so much hard thinking and worry, kiddie?" he asked, suddenly. "Best say it right out. You know, child, the best time to get what you want out of a foolish man is when he's eaten. I've just eaten."

Mary turned at once. Her movement was so abrupt as to suggest she was startled at the man's smiling challenge.

She looked into the deep-set eyes and her whimsical smile dawned at once.

"How did you guess there was a thing I needed from you, Daddy Dan?" she questioned.

Father Dan shook his graying head.

"It's easy," he said. "You've had Oolinak days fixing your big kyak. He's doubled its ribs for strength. He's double-covered its bottom, and used more tar to it than I've ever known him smear before. He's double-lined its stowage so it's waterproof. He's been making it ready for a big trip. Where?"

"Big Waters."

"Ah!"

Father Dan was stiffly erect on his stool. His book remained on his knees with one hand spread out over its pages. The other was holding one worn cover with fingers gripping it with a sudden tightening.

"You know, kiddie," he went on, after a moment, "I was just thinking, watching you in that doorway, you only needed to be smoking to make it seem that trailman father of yours didn't hand me a girl kid to raise." The smile passed abruptly from his eyes. "You want me to tell you to go on a joy trip on the worst waters God Almighty ever poured out on this northland of ours?"

"Not a joy trip," the girl retorted. "A trip. Ther's a difference."

"Yes. It's that difference."

Mary left the doorway and came to Father Dan's side. Her smile had faded out. There was passionate earnestness in her eyes as she regarded him.

"I want to pull out in the night, tomorrow," she said. "Right after midnight when ther's two hours of dark. I want to clear the point then when the folks at the Fort will be in their blankets, an' the Neches in the shore camp, too. They're all there now. Dutch, Jean, and Lola. And Oolinak's got no word of them getting fixed to make any trip. I'll go south on the lake till we're below the skyline. Then we'll make north to where Flood River breaks out. There's not a thing to Flood River we're not wise to. And there's no northern water to worry Oolinak. I'm set on this trip like

nothing in the world, Daddy Dan. I've just *got* to make Big Waters before Andy gets along back to home."

"Why?"

Mary shook her head. And there was a queer little stubbornness in the movement. Then her eyes shone impishly.

Suddenly Father Dan's book slammed shut. And he reached out and set it on the table where the supper things stood.

"It's—Big Waters," he cried, and sat staring out through the doorway as though flat, uncompromising refusal were about to follow. "Good Hope. Leaping Horse. Across the lake. Anywhere at all. I'd say yes right away and—forget it. But—Big Waters!"

Mary laid a hand on the big hunched shoulders. She, too, was gazing out where the smiling sunshine lit the night as though it were high noon.

"I know," she said, in a low tone, though her eyes were shining. "It's bad. Wicked. It's cost you a good friend. It's cost Andy his father. And it's just because of those things I—I must go."

For some moments there was no reply. Father Dan was gazing down at the landing where Mary's craft was straining at its mooring. He wanted to refuse flatly. He wanted to tell the girl to run off to her blankets and forget her craziness. He wanted to tell her that if trouble befell her it would break his heart. But he did none of these things. He reached one hand up and patted the hand resting on his shoulders.

"Yes," he said, thoughtfully, "it's cost us all that. And now—now ——" Suddenly, he flung up a pair of helpless hands, and his smile broke afresh. "Kiddie, what sort of crazy notion makes you yearn for Big Waters? Isn't your knowledge of that northern hell sufficient? Why can't it be somewhere else, somewhere where you can find God's smile? Somewhere where there's 'Good' for treasure. I've spent years learning to say 'no' to you, and I haven't got it right yet. Maybe I never will—till it's too late. You can go, kiddie, if you must. And I pray God to watch over you and bring you safely back to me."

Mary's smiling face was a study in gratitude and love.

She flung two arms about the man's big neck in an embrace that was irresistible. She kissed him on the iron gray of his thick hair while he raised a threatening, warning hand.

"No, kiddie," he cried, with pretended censure. "Don't dare act that way. I won't have your shameless thanks. I've told you 'yes' because I had to. I've known it right along. Ever since Andy went. I haven't been fooled from the moment you started your first trail with Oolinak. You've planned for this right along. And you've planned with a sense no other kid would have done. You've waited till you knew it all and were grown right. Well, go to it. I'll not disappoint you. And when you need me, there're the two big hands of a man waiting to give you any help you need."

The following morning Mary found Oolinak cleaning out the old shack, which was the kennels of the Mission dogs. The Eskimo had just fed the wolfish creatures a liberal measure of raw fish from the lake.

The feeding of Mary's dogs was a matter which, for her, never failed in its interest. These great savages of the trail were without any leavening unless it were their courage and endurance on the top of the snow. Yet they claimed an affection from her that made them one of the greatest joys of her life. She loved them for their untamable natures, for their insensate greed and their lust for fight. And now she stood smilingly watching as they tore ravenously at the mass of raw flesh and gulped it down with slavering jaws. She watched the slashing fangs, and, as though it were precious music to her, she listened to the snarling threat that went on all the time they ate.

Blaze, the second leader that was coming on to take the place of the redoubtable but ageing Benjie, was like a whirlwind in his eagerness. The youngster was vociferous and furiously alive. He was vital, savage beyond words—a hectoring creature that seemed conscious of his position of responsibility in the team he was to lead. There was Benjie, sedate, quiet, but effective. And his belly was fuller than any of the rest.

The humor of that fact appealed to his mistress. Benjie

had always been like that. No time was ever lost in vain snarlings. An effective slash of his great fangs was all he ever permitted himself. He was always first, always foremost, whether in fight, food, or work.

Mary pointed at Benjie's distended flanks and laughed delightedly.

"There's no sort of weakening in him yet, Oolinak," she said. "He's still on top of them all. And they're all years younger. He'll still be our 'loose lead' when Andy comes."

The Eskimo leaned on his worn shovel, and his black eyes goggled at the young mistress he adored.

"Mush good dog, Benjie," he nodded, his broad features wreathed in his rubber smile. "Benjie dam devil dog mak fight lak hell. Mush good dog. Oh, yes."

The man's enjoyment was intense. And Mary laughed happily.

"He needs all he can eat. They all do. From now to freeze-up. They got to be hard next winter. Harder than they've ever been. You tell that to Jane Hesther so she can see to it while we're away."

"Us mak 'em all big trip?"

The Eskimo's grin had gone. His eyes were goggling with a new expression which seemed to contain doubt. Mary understood. And the mischief in her gave her a thrill of enjoyment.

She studied the questioning eyes, and thought how like was one Eskimo to another. Here was a male Jane Hesther, except for the woman's fat. Oolinak was sheer muscle packed in an iron frame without a weak spot anywhere in it. His limbs were of great bulk, but lean, so that his muscles stood out like ropes heavily knotted. And his shoulders and chest! They were prodigious.

"Whispering Lake! Big Waters! This night! The good Boss says 'yes.' "

The effect of Mary's announcement was instant and ludicrous. The man's eyes rolled in the fashion of Jane Hesther's. It even seemed as if his duskiness had paled.

"Us mak 'em all devil country? Mush bad med'cine. Plenty. Oh, yes. Oolinak all go dead quick. Devil-devil mak fly 'way with him. Oh, yes. Mar-ee, too. Him lak' bad. All time bad.

Andy him come? One year? Two year? No Mar-ee. So. Not never."

Mary hugged herself, chuckling at the tone of awe.

"Sure. Devil-devil wait for us at Whispering Lake," she scorned. "We'll hear him whisper, calling, calling to us. And we'll let him snatch us up an' fly away with us, like fool Neches, and scared Eskimos. It'll be ter'ble, won't it? He'll have a bad time flying away with you, though. You're so heavy. Still, if you're scared an' don't fight it'll be easier for him."

"No good fight him devil-devil."

"Wonder how he'll like flying away with Benjie? 'Cos Benjie's going with us. I want him to learn the trail. Benjie'll fight. He's only a dog. But he's no coward."

Mary waited. She was smiling her mischievous taunt, watching for its effect. Oolinak turned. And his troubled eyes gazed out northwards. Then, presently, she saw the sturdy body stiffen.

"Oolinak not coward, too," the Eskimo said, at last. "Benjie fight. Oolinak all fight plenty. Mar-ee shoot 'em lak all sort. Oh, yes. All same no good. Us tell 'em Mar-ee. So. When us mak 'em big trail?"

"Tonight. When the Fort and the camp all asleep. Jane Hesther will make us a big outfit. One month. Two months. Three months. She must give us stores from the Mission. She mustn't get fresh stores from the Fort till we're away."

"So. All mans not know."

Oolinak wagged his head comprehendingly. Mary nodded.

"Good man, Oolinak. You fix Jane Hesther so no one knows." Then she chuckled again. "Devil-devil fly away with us? We fly away with fool devil-devil! You're a wonderful feller, Oolinak."

The girl's praise was too much for the Eskimo's superstitious dread. His eyes quit rolling, his rubberish grin returned, and when Mary turned away he went on with his work as though the devil-devil he feared had been put to flight forever.

The brief night of early spring had closed down. It was scarcely dark. The sky was without any moon, and the

stars were hidden behind a black film of cloud. The result was a sort of very deep twilight.

Father Dan paused on his way up from the landing where he had watched the big kyak slip away with Mary, and Oolinak, and the great dog, Benjie, on a swift stream. He stood gazing after the heavily laden craft listening. There was no sound of paddle. Nothing at all. The boat had been swallowed up by the night. And he knew it had less than two hours in which to reach safety from detection by those at the Fort and the camp at the point.

The girl would do it. He had no fear on that score. He was satisfied that Mary would get away safely, but his satisfaction ended there. A sense of bleak desolation descended upon him when he finally continued on up to his hut.

As Father Dan entered the hut Jane Hesther waddled out of Mary's empty room, where she had been clearing up the litter of the girl's departure. She heaved a profound sigh that was almost a groan. Her eyes were as near tears as they ever came, and her brows were ominously drawn. She considered the big figure of the man. And the expression of tears merged into a stormy look. She raised a fat, pointing arm.

"Good Boss all same dam fool say Mar-ee go Big Water. Yes!" she exploded.

It came with all the fierce passion of Jane Hesther's hasty temper. It was an expression of a world of feeling that could no longer be restrained. Then she waddled off to her kitchen, leaving in her wake a trail of angry muttering.

Father Dan gazed after her. So surely was the Eskimo's verdict in accordance with his own that he made no attempt to reply. He bitterly told himself of his unfitness as Mary's guardian. He felt like a criminal. He felt as though he were responsible for the whole mad proceeding—as though he had designed it and urged the girl to it.

He turned to the desk where an oil lamp was standing a-light. And for the first time he became aware of the open book lying there. It was a Bible. It was the Bible which Larry Forsyth had given to him before his last fatal trip, and which he had set among his many books on their shelves for safe hiding. It was lying with its cover open and there

was something written and drawn on the yellow end paper. He stared down at these things. He read the few cryptic letters written there, and studied the even more cryptic drawing. But though he failed to understand the message Larry had left behind him for Andy he quite understood why the book was lying open on the desk. Mary had taken a copy of the drawing and the letters with her.

CHAPTER VIII

MARY CLAIMS HER HERITAGE

"HARK 'em!"

It was a low, whispered challenge, urgent with an awe that was almost panic. It was Oolinak at the stern of the kyak. And as the words came, the craft yawed in the sluggish stream as though his fear had detrimentally affected his skill.

Mary ceased paddling. She laid her paddle athwart the craft in front of her and listened. And as she did so the smile that dawned in her wide, far-gazing eyes suggested that the Eskimo's apprehensions had left her wholly untouched.

The air was without the lightest ruffle of a breeze. It was still, and furiously hot under a brazen sun. There was not a cloud in the sky anywhere to suggest storm. There was no bird flight, even, within the range of human vision to account for the sounds. Nor was there a ripple of movement on the flat glass-like surface of the lake whose waters seemed too dead and heavy for any disturbance. Yet the air was full of a queer intermittent whispering that rose and fell in definite cadence. It suggested some hidden being whispering, whispering in a language wholly incomprehensible.

If Mary knew nothing of Oolinak's fears of the "devil-devil" of Whispering Lake, she was, nevertheless, full of the keenest interest. The whisper was there. There was no imagination in that. And she searched every direction to discover some practical source for it, material or elemental. But, so far as she could judge, there was none. The lake just

whispered on, chattering to itself in its uncanny, incomprehensible tongue.

It was a wide flat of water bounded only by the blue sky that came down to meet it. There were no hills surrounding it. No woods. Nothing better than a low swamp shore that became a firm foothold only when the freeze-up gripped it. It was only saved from a sense of utter desolation by the brilliance of sun and the perfect sky shining down upon it.

Mary picked up her paddle and dipped it vigorously, and, as she did so, she gurgled her queer little chuckle at the man behind her.

"Your devil-devil ought to learn a language folks can understand," she laughed, derisively. "What's the use of his saying all his fool talk if no one can understand it? It wouldn't scare a lemming."

But even as she spoke, her laughter died out. And she found herself listening to the whisper.

Oolinak made no reply. All the attention of which he was still capable he gave to flogging the wisp of stream, which was the course of Flood River through the heavy bosom of Whispering Lake. He was in a fever to leave the devil-haunted precincts behind him.

It had taken just a clear week on the northward-flowing stream to reach the lake, which was something more than half the journey to Big Waters. It had been a week of unrelieved monotony under a blistering heat, and the unceasing attacks of winged pests. The voyagers had camped for no more than a bare sufficiency of rest each night, urging forward at the greatest possible speed they could make.

It was Mary. It was Mary who ordered their journey in its every detail, and Oolinak, perhaps one of the soundest trailmen of his race, who obeyed her without question or grumble. It was sufficient for the Eskimo that "Mar-ee" must reach Big Waters, and return in safety to the "good Boss," who was waiting for her at the Mission. His only concern was to fulfill those two purposes. Meanwhile, her lightest word was his law, and her smile was the only sunshine his dusky soul reveled in.

Halfway across Whispering Lake the dog Benjie yawned, stretched himself, cocked an ear and sat up where he had

been sprawled amidships on the securely lashed outfit. In a moment he made it plain that Whispering Lake was no more to his taste than it was to the taste of the Eskimo. He began at once to growl. He snarled at intervals. Then he would drop his fiercer tones to a pitiful whine that expressed a fear that was wholly foreign to him.

Mary spoke to him. She chided him sharply. She even raised a threatening hand at the wolfish muzzle, which the dog hated to have slapped. It made no difference beyond changing the note of the beast's protest. His grumble went on till the craft felt the full flow of the river again and the Lake was left behind them.

Oolinak watched the dog with sympathetic eyes as it grumbled through the whole gamut of canine emotions from snarling anger to whine of fear. Mary watched the beast with a mind no longer derisive but searching. To her the queer whisper of the lake was in the air, drifting hither and thither, as though the sound waves were on the move everywhere, and had no source and no end. Benjie seemed to view it from a different angle. There was no doubt of that. Once he had become aware of the whisper his fierce eyes never left the flat surface of the water. So far as he was concerned, the sound evidently came from beneath it.

And therein he was at one with the acute native sense of Oolinak. Oolinak believed with all his superstitious soul that the dread devil-devil was a monster who dwelt in the bosom of the lake. And he knew he was so mighty, so evil, that in his anger and ferocity, he was capable of rifting the ice from end to end of the lake when winter froze it solid to the bottom.

By the time the quickening stream caught the kyak and rushed it into the canyon where the river emptied itself out northward from the lake, Mary had all unconsciously become a victim of the influences at work on the lake. The angry fear of the dog behind her, the rolling of the Eskimo's troubled eyes—these things affected her more than she knew, and when the granite walls of the gorge rose up about them, and the churning of swift waters shut out the last sound of the disturbing whispers, she realized the easing of

a mental burden which gave her young mind no small measure of relief.

Mary knew the whole thing to be no more than some freakish expression of Nature. But, nevertheless, when finally Benjie sprawled his great body again on the outfit, and resumed his interrupted slumbers, and Oolinak's eyes lost their look of undisguised terror, and he once more became wholly absorbed in the navigation of the craft as the surge of the stream carried it beyond the reach of the uncanny whisper, she felt it to be like the passing of some subtle but profound threat that was wholly menacing.

For a full two days more the journey went on down a powerful free stream rendered swollen and turbulent by the spring floods. It was deep in the heart of an overshadowing gorge whose lofty granite walls multiplied and magnified every sound that rose above the murmur of the speeding waters.

It was a gloomy canyon that remained wholly unbroken, except to admit the flush water pouring out of side streams, while here and there in remote crevices the walls were decorated with the sparse, dismal foliage of stunted primordial black pines. The place was alive with winging sea-fowl whose harsh cries created a babel of echoes. Under the blaze of the summer sky mosquitoes of monstrous size attacked without mercy.

To the live, fresh mind of Mary it was all new, all amazing in its wonder. The girl's urgent soul was hungering, yearning. The labors of it all were nothing to her strong young body. But the intensity of watchfulness needed, which left her not a carefree moment, was uplifting, was full of a thrill that stirred every fiber of her body.

In spite of the uninviting nature of the gorge the ingenuity and skill of Oolinak found sufficient landings. They came at uncertain intervals and were seized upon. They were made without any of the disaster which seemed to threaten at every attempt.

The Eskimo was unerring in his judgment, and, as Mary sat over the driftwood camp-fire, which was the first essential of a landing, eating the hard trail fare that was swiftly

prepared, or stretching her cramped limbs, a great pride, a great warmth of admiration filled her impressionable heart as she watched the man going about his work with as little apparent concern as though he were performing his daily chores at the Mission.

After the gorge came the worst reach of the whole river. It extended for upwards of a hundred miles, right up to the towering cliffs of the Arctic delta where rugged shapes reared their bald heads out of the gray, northern mists. It was a desolation to depress the spirit of the hardiest.

It was swamp, swamp, swamp in every direction. Far out, east and west, and to the northward, losing itself in a burden of depressing mists. It was a muskeg world with the broad, central channel of the river winding its way amid a swarm of deathtraps: mire, and shoal, and rank-growing weeds. It was the bottomless mire of muskeg that would have gripped and held the kyak until it rotted; it was shoal that would have needed only seconds of time to rip out the hide bottom of the craft; and the reeds were forest-like from which there would have been no escape for a fragile craft once caught in them.

Then there was a maze of tributary waterways which flooded into the river from every fantastic direction. They churned its waters into swirling eddies, beating them into fierce rapids which forced the Eskimo to perilous detours where the shallows threatened.

It was a nightmare world suggesting the origin of the river's threatening title, and it justified all of Father Dan's expressive warning. But Oolinak gave no sign as he confronted it, and for Mary it had no terrors. The girl was full of the supreme confidence of her years—those years of preparation for the task to which she had set her reckless hands.

Mary knew no doubt or hesitation. There was nothing in that which she beheld now to give her the smallest panic. All her life she had dreamed of the trail, yearning for its reckless life and adventure in the world that knew no mercy. All her life its appeal had eaten its way into the very bowels of her soul. Here, on this grim river, where death and despair waited upon the least mistake, miscalculation, she felt she

had entered upon the heritage that was hers. The trail was her life which those who had bred her had intended for her, and, be the end of it what it might, she asked no better than to be permitted to follow it. Then there was Andy. Was not all her life for—Andy?

It was the final stage, and Mary's heart was bursting with the desire of it all, the fierce labor of it.

Under the skillful piloting of Oolinak the world of muskeg, with all its treachery, all its dire potentialities, had been swallowed up in the mists of distance behind them. Now they were in a new world—a world of green granite which was without one smile of Nature's graciousness. It was utterly sterile. It was grim and windswept. And it was alive with myriads of winging sea-fowl.

The kyak was battling against an ocean tide running in full flood, and reinforced by a stiff northern breeze. The boat was pitching dangerously, and yawing with every chill gust that caught it. It was infinitesimal in the great inner cove of Big Waters, which had abruptly widened out to the proportions of a sea. It looked well-nigh impossible that so frail a craft could live even for minutes in such waters.

Mary, at the bow, and Oolinak, astern, were thrusting their paddles with every ounce of the resources left to them. They were stealing headway. But that was just about all. The task of reaching either of the far-flung shores looked hopeless.

Mary's pretty lips were compressed into a thin, hard line. She was at the limit of endurance. But the dogged resolve in the eyes that were narrowed against the sting of the north wind told of a courage that was wholly undefeated. She was peering ahead gazing at the lashing fury where the great cove was gated from the white ocean beyond by the submerged barrier set between twin headlands. And she was wondering how long they had yet to battle with the tide that was streaming in through that raging gap.

Oolinak was paddling with the precision of an automaton. But his simple thoughts were very humanly busy. He was not concerned with how long the battle with the tide must go on, or how long the reinforced kyak could stand up to

the buffeting it was enduring. He was looking for swift escape from these things. He was searching the granite cliffs to the west, which, bathed in a full blaze of a wintering sun, took on the hues of a mountain of jade. He was seeking indications and found them. And he read them unerringly.

"Us mak 'em him shore wher' no sun," he said, in his low, guttural tones, indicating the western cliffs, which were deeply shadowed. "Mabbe us all find 'em easy watter. Yes. Us mak 'em all big water wher' him sun shine plenty. No good. Not. Mar-ee say 'em 'Yes'? Oolinak all same mak 'em."

Mary shipped her paddle. In an instant the kyak swung away from the wind and rolled heavily. Benjie rolled, too. He scrambled to his haunches, snuffing at the fierce breeze, and hard put to it to keep his balance on the outfit. Mary laughed and drove her paddle so that the kyak steadied at once. Then she nodded.

"Sure. We'll make across."

"Us mak 'em."

The boat swung across the tide even as the Eskimo spoke. And, at once, all that had gone before was as nothing to the battle that instantly began. The craft promptly dipped to its thwart and rolled back like a keelless log. And not all the skill of the paddles could hold it steady. Then Oolinak was fighting the leeway that developed simultaneously.

For nearly an hour the struggle went on while Benjie whined and snarled as he was flung from one side of the outfit to the other. Then, at last, Oolinak's rightness proved. The surge of the tide lessened. The rolling became less violent. The leeway became well within Oolinak's control. And, finally, completely slack water was reached in the shadow of the western cliffs.

The moment the craft rode an even keel Mary shipped her paddle, and her slim young body drooped forward.

It was just the chance of things.

As Oolinak nosed the craft in to the shore it was to run against the remains of an old log landing. Then away up from the water there were the flattened remains of the *débris* from an earth-working. Even from down at the water's edge the disheveled remains of a crude hauling gear

were visible in its midst. But beyond that, where the cliffs rose sheer to dizzy heights, Mary discovered the gaping mouth of a cavern whose opening was described in an irregular triangle.

Without waiting to help the Eskimo with the kyak Mary sprang ashore and hurried up the heavy incline toward these things. And when, finally, Oolinak's work at the water's edge was completed, and he joined his young mistress, he found her inside the cavern gazing down at a flattened pile of dead ashes which marked the place where many camp-fires had been lit.

CHAPTER IX

DUTCH WONDERS

Father Dan left his Mission and set out down the river in the direction of Lola Duchette's store. He walked rapidly, and without much regard for the stony nature of his path. He was preoccupied with thoughts which worried his usually calm mind and inspired unease.

It was a still, hot day. The flood of spring had long since abated and the river was down to its normal level. The flies and mosquitoes were fiercely aggressive in a world which was never without some discomfort.

Father Dan knew that the summer freight team of oomiaks had arrived from Fort Good Hope and were unloading at the Fort. He was eager to get his mail.

Father Dan's unease was for Mary. She had not yet returned from Big Waters. It was two months since she had set out with Oolinak and her dog, and no word of any sort had come back to him. He had not looked for word, but he had calculated closely out of his own experience and the knowledge he had gleaned from Larry Forsyth, and he felt her to be overdue. His confidence in Oolinak was comparable to Mary's own. But he knew, only too well, the chances of that northern trail when the bore of the spring freshet was running.

His concern was solely confined to the possibility of accident. From the moment of Mary's going his watchful eyes

had been on the movements of those at the Fort. There had been no sign in that ill-assorted household to give him the least qualm of apprehension. Dutch had never moved from its precincts. Jean and Lola had never stirred beyond the native camp on the lake shore. No, he felt that that aspect of the situation was without a cloud. But two months? In his estimate it was at least a week too long. Mary should have been back a week ago.

Rounding the bend at the point the freight boats came into view. There were five of them in the charge of the man Pierre Baudi and his river Indians, and when he discovered them unloading was in full swing. Dutch Deazel and Jean were down at the water's edge superintending the work. And a chattering bunch of natives were crowding about the boats, their eyes alight with greed.

Father Dan came up. He greeted the freighter with the cordial friendliness of outland dwellers who all too rarely meet. And he smiled readily as he listened to the man's bitter grumble at the dog's life his work afforded.

"You know, Padre," he said, with a laugh of humor, "you folk say God A'mighty made Heaven an' Earth, an' all the pestilential things that worry a boy from the time he's born till the time he quits out. Wal, I guess you know about them things. But I'd say He never took no hand in fixing Hope River an' the lake atop of it. That got out of Hell when He wasn't around. Or He was sleepin' or somethin'. An' He never had the time to set it back agin. Blow! Gee! We were adrift on that crazy wind patch for three days an' nights, an' couldn't make a landing. I guessed we wer' all fer turnin' into stone images at the bottom of that sump, with a cargo of junk you'd need to break up with dynamite. Man, it was a terror!"

Father Dan's eyes twinkled.

"I know. Caught you on the halfway. It likes it best that way."

"It's only safe when it's froze solid," Dutch Deazel said, loading a bale of colored blankets on to the broad back of an Eskimo.

Jean spat. Standing idly by with his big hands in the

tops of his breeches, his eyes staring blankly at the missionary, he nodded.

"Safe when it's froze?" he scorned. "Ther' ain't nothin' safe to it any time. I never want to make it ever, 'cep' when I quit Whitewater for keeps."

Father Dan looked into the cold eyes of the big youth.

"And when'll that be?" he asked.

Jean's upper lip lifted.

"When Maw sees sense," he snarled.

The missionary considered the speaker for a moment. Then, with a feeling of disgust, he turned again to the freighter.

"Any mail?"

"Sure. The dame's got a packet up at the Fort. There's a bunch of books for you, too, I guess. I see they was books," he added, "when the water got at the wrappin' an' it come adrift."

Father Dan nodded and turned away. He moved off up to the store in a hurry.

Lola was inside the Fort surrounded by a dump of goods that half filled the floor space. She was actively at work, pulling, thrusting, stowing, in an effort to clear space. It was one of those few moments in her life when the most amiable was uppermost in her. Fresh stores. Stores that meant trade. Trade that meant profit. She was that worst of all human parasites, an insatiable profiteer who squeezes the producer and consumer alike.

She looked around quickly as the priest's big figure darkened the doorway. There was even a half smile in her dark eyes as she straightened her plump figure.

"Lookin' fer mail?" she inquired, almost pleasantly. Then she spread out hands that were grimed with dirt. "I'd say mail's a hundred per cent of most folks' lives." She shook her head and eyed the heaping stores. "Not mine, though."

She hurried to the back of the store. She picked up a packet wrapped in oilskin and unrolled it. Then she dealt out the letters, studying the addresses. There were three for the missionary.

She handed them over. And in the case of each she had read the post mark carefully. She knew without any sort of

doubt what each one signified. One was from the Mission College at Calford. One was his half-yearly credit and cash. And the one that came from the East was a letter from Andy.

"Ther's a bunch of books, too," she said, setting a somewhat damaged parcel on the counter in front of him. Father Dan took the letters and glanced at the address on the books.

"Andy," he said. And the smile in his eyes was full of happy satisfaction. "You know, ma'am, it makes you feel good when you think of a kid thousands of miles away who kind of remembers all a book means to you when the winter night shuts down. You don't expect kids to think that way. There's so much else for them. He's a great lad."

Lola watched him open his mail. He passed the credit over to the waiting woman.

"That's the tally of my debt," he said, and pocketed the loose cash. "Thank you, ma'am."

Then he read the brief letter from the Mission College Superior. That, too, he put in his pocket. Finally, he opened Andy's long letter and read it while the woman returned to her work.

The goods were still coming in and Lola seemed wholly preoccupied with them. But the tail of her quick eyes was observing. She never permitted herself to lose sight of the man absorbed in his letter.

At last Father Dan looked up. He re-folded the pages carefully and returned them to their cover. Then he set it in an inner pocket. His eyes were shining as he watched an Indian dump a keg, which obviously contained liquor, well apart from the piled goods. He spoke on the impulse and without care.

"It seems too good to be true, ma'am," he said, with a warmth he made no attempt to conceal. "You start a boy out to begin the business of the life you've planned for him, you set him among folks who're all ready to show him the good time he's never known, and you think, or hope, he'll act the way you've planned. It's not reasonable. It's not even sensible. I guess it's no more than one kid in a hundred acts the way you've planned for him. Andy's that one. Andy's

made good in every examination right up to now. There's not a thing now till he takes his degree next summer. He's taken honors in most everything. That's just the greatest news ever."

Lola's dark eyes were smiling. But they were watchful.

"That's surely fine," she agreed, with cordiality. "An' he's through when he gets that—degree?"

"Yes. That qualifies him and he's through. He figures to get up here just about freeze-up next year. I must go tell Jane Hesther. It'll set Mary crazy glad, too."

"Mary back?"

Lola had turned to her work again and was hauling a tea chest from under some rolls of printed cotton. Father Dan stiffened. His gladness had carried him away.

"No. She'll be along any day now, though. You know she won't quit while there's a sick Neche on the south shore."

Father Dan was acting a lie deliberately, but he did it with conviction. Lola nodded.

"Ther's mail for her, too," she said. "One. Guess you best take it." Then she smiled shrewdly. "Maybe it's from the same locality as yours from Andy."

But there was no responsive smile from the missionary.

"Yes. I'll take it," he said, shortly. Then he glanced at the growing stack of stores. "There should be a chest of drugs from the college," he said. "Has it come up from the landing yet?"

Lola searched the stores.

"Not yet."

She went to the counter and picked up Mary's letter. Father Dan set it with the others in his inner pocket.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, coolly, and moved toward the door as another bearer appeared. The man was heavily laden, and Father Dan waited to let the Neche pass.

"I'll send Jane Hesther along for those drugs," he said. And, with a sense of having been too free with information, he passed out of the store.

Lola was standing behind her counter leaning her strong, bare arms folded upon it. Most of the stores had been cleared from the floor and stowed to be dealt with at her leisure.

Jean was lounging in the open doorway which had always been the favorite point of observation of his father.

The mother was considering his immense figure obscuring the sunlight beyond the door. And it was not with feelings of maternal pride. She was estimating, appraising the youth's value in the struggle she knew now to be lying ahead of them only a year hence. In that moment the loss of Simon seemed to her to be a calamity whose magnitude was devastating. She was left for dependence upon the great, morose creature whose possibilities, even as his mother, she had been wholly unable to fathom.

After careful consideration she decided there was only one way in which to deal with her silent, uncouth son.

"Well, boy," she said, at last, in a tone intended to be conciliatory, "the 'show-down' starts twelve months come this year's freeze-up."

Jean turned on the instant.

"How?"

Then he reached the door and slammed it shut. He moved across the floor to the counter. And his moccasined feet gave out no sound. Something in the stealth of his movements afforded his mother encouragement.

"Andy gets along back a full-fledged mining engineer like his father was. I got it from Father Dan. He's just got a long letter, an' he came right up fer his mail before I'd had a chanct at it. I don't know all the boy said. Father Dan just handed me that stuff, an' seemed worried the moment he'd said it."

The dark eyes snapped as though Lola found humor in the fact of the missionary's disturbance.

"Does it make you feel good? Millions!" the mother mused. "I wonder?" She paused. Then, presently, she nodded meditatively. "Yes, I guess that's so. An' that kid's comin' to claim them. Else—Tcha! What's the use? You an' Dutch haven't found, because you don't know. That boy was sent away to learn. And now he knows. Well, it's him an' us."

"He didn't mail to anyone but Father Dan?"

The pale eyes stared unblinkingly as Jean put his question. His mother watched him curiously.

"Yes. Mary."

Jean turned away. He stared across the room.

"Yep. I guess it makes me feel good," he admitted, after awhile.

"What you mean?" she demanded. "What fool play you figgerin'? Andy's comin' along up to show you wher' there's a cache worth millions of dollars. An' you and Dutch ha' got to twist him for it. See? Ther's goin' to be no foolishness. What's worryin' you he's sent mail to Mary? She don't play any part in the game that I can see. Let's get it clear. If Mary's standin' 'tween you two boys, you can cut her right out till we've pouched that cache. Ther's goin' to be no squaw humpin' even if she's white. We've waited years fer the dough that feller's father left behind. An' I'm not standin' fer things that cut across gettin' it. That cache first. An' after that you can play all the kid foolishness with that crazy slut after. Make it so we lose it an' I swear to God I'll cut you adrift without two cents to fill your belly with."

The woman's dark eyes were aflame. Her threat was in the furious heaving of her plump breasts. Her voice was unraised, but it lacked nothing in malignance for that.

Suddenly Jean flung up his head. His pale eyes looked squarely into his mother's. There was no shrinking in him. His cold face had taken on a faint tinge of pink, which was more than ominous. He crashed a clenched fist down on the rough counter, and the snarl of his voice was something wolfish.

"Curse your bloody millions," he cried. "That's all that matters by your reckonin'. You'd set around here foolin' gorl-darned Neches an' pass your men to hell fer the dollars you mean to pouch. I don't figger with you 'cep' to pull the plums you're yearnin' for. Well, I'll pull them the way it suits me—*me*! Get that! An' it suits me to fix that bitch kid at the Mission, an' I'm goin' to. That feller's comin' along up because of her. An' she's crazy waitin' fer him. She allowed she wouldn't marry me if ther' wasn't nothin' but dead fish in the world. Well, I'll tell her now she's dead right. But she won't marry that bum red-head. She won't marry anything. I'll see to that ——"

"You'll mind the business that belongs you. An' that's

the thing your father played for an' lost," the mother broke in, with eyes flashing dangerously, and in a voice strident with hot feeling.

"Will I?" Again the great fist crashed on the woodwork. "I'll mind my business. *Mine*!" And one fist thumped the man's chest violently. "The rest's on the side. See here, Maw, you bred me, an' that's sufficient. You set me around 'cos it suited your fancy. Your's an'—Paw's. Well, that's just all ther' is to it. I'm livin' because you an' father reckoned to have me live. But it's my life now, an' I'll do just what in hell I like with it. I'll get after those millions sure, because I need my full third of 'em. But I'll do it just the way I choose, an' you can set around an' wait for the dope that's comin' to you. Fer twenty years you've played me fer a fool kid. An' now I'm through."

The man turned his back on the woman who had failed to realize the full ugliness of his savage manhood. He stood for a second while his queer eyes stared straight in front of him. Then, silent-footed, he moved toward the door and passed out of the store.

Lola watched him go. Her eyes never wavered. There was not a movement of his that escaped them. And as the door opened and Jean passed out into the sunlight beyond she drew a sharp breath. Jean was as big, even bigger than his father had been. She saw that all the father had been reproduced in the son. But whereas the father had been her man, fighting, striving for her, there was no such bond holding her son—not even the bond of filial devotion. In that moment she knew a stab of real fear.

Dutch Deazel was squatting alone over a fire, just beyond the outskirts of the native camp on the shore of the lake. He was there for his own reasons, which were none too wholesome. But that was the man. Life had taught him a few lessons. And one of them was the safety from unpleasant complications to be found in association with native women.

It was late night. At this season of the year there was no complete darkness. Just an hour of velvet twilight when myriads of stars lit the sky, and the northern lights played in the brief absence of the sun.

He sat with his knees drawn up and his great hands clasped about them. And, with the smoke-drift fending off the mosquitoes swarming to attack, he gazed out through the haze at the dark spread of the waters of the lake.

He was thinking of the news which Lola had imparted to him that day. And he was feeling glad. At last it looked as though his patience was to be finally rewarded. Andy was to return. He was coming at the earliest moment after his final examinations down East. The thought conjured dreams in his covetous mind. Pleasant dreams. Dreams of opulence at the cost of only a little bloodshed. That was all right. That was quite a small matter. And he was to have a third share in the treasure!

He smiled grimly at the dark waters reflecting the starry sheen on the night sky. A third! Jean, Lola. They were to have the rest. Would they? It was ——

His senses quickened. There was a sound out on the water. And it came from somewhere out of the south. It might have been the splash of a leaping fish. Then again it might have been the dip of an Indian paddle. He leaned clear of the smoke of his fire and peered across the water. And, instantly, a hundred stings on the back of his great neck set one great hand brushing the mosquitoes to swift death.

After a few moments he found it. It was clearly outlined in the soft twilight where the northern lights found reflection in the water. It was a long, double kyak. It was manned fore and aft, and amidships was the wolfish shape of a dog squatting on its haunches and gazing ahead. It was entering the river mouth from out of the south of the lake. He recognized first the boat and then the slim figure of Mary at the bow.

He thought of hailing the girl. But it was only for an instant. He just sat silently watching till the kyak passed the point and was swallowed up by the twilit distance. Father Dan had given out that Mary had gone on a trip to the Indian settlements on the south shore. He started to reckon up how long she had been away. And his reckoning startled him. She had been away about two months.

He kicked his fire together, and hunched himself well

under cover of the smoke-drift. And, hugging his drawn-up knees again, he wondered.

CHAPTER X

THE VULTURES GATHER

Breakfast at the Mission was eaten in an atmosphere of supreme content. Mary was back home. Father Dan's anxieties had abated. He sat gazing across the little table at the bowed fair head as the girl hungrily devoured her food while reading the close-written pages of Andy's long letter to her.

Then there was Jane Hesther. The light of her dusky life had returned to her, sun-tanned and full of smiling cheer. During the meal she popped in and out of her kitchen on any absurd pretext, and her irrepressible tongue clacked out a stream of chatter in a manner more than usually incoherent.

Mary's plate emptied. And its emptying synchronized with her reading of the last of Andy's postscripts. She heaved a contented sigh.

"That kid's just crazy foolish," she nodded, with her chuckle of humor.

Then she folded the pages of her precious letter with much neatness. Just for an instant there was an upward glance of some doubt in Father Dan's direction. Then the letter was swiftly secreted within the bosom of her cotton shirt. And Father Dan smiled.

He understood. The difference between his letter and Mary's was that the girl's was intended for her eyes alone. He was glad enough he had rescued it from Lola's hands immediately on its arrival.

"You best read mine, too," he said, producing the bunched pages from his pocket. And Mary seized upon them with something of avidity.

She read the long letter to its end without a word of comment. Then she passed it back and sat regarding her precious guardian with deeply thoughtful eyes.

"The freeze-up next year," she said at last. "About fifteen months. That'll give me the whole of next winter."

"What for?"

In a moment Father Dan's anxieties were looming again.

But no explanation was forthcoming. Mary just remained staring straight in front of her with her elbows firmly planted on the little table.

Then, of a sudden, she pushed back her seat and stood up. In a moment she had passed to the open doorway. And Father Dan's misgivings deepened.

"What is it, Mary?" he urged quietly.

Mary was gazing down at the landing where her boat had been moored the night before. It was empty. Her outfit had been removed from it. Oolinak was down there. So was Benjie. The dog was sprawled on the shore sunning himself. He was full of food and heavily somnolent. The sight of these things gave the girl an impression of unreality. It seemed to her her two months' journey was only a dream.

"You know, Daddy Dan," she said at last, speaking over her shoulder, "it'll be a deal easier in winter than in summer. And it's better anyway. When Andy comes it'll be the winter trail to Big Waters, unless he's foolish and waits for summer. But he mustn't wait. That would suit the others. Jean and Dutch are scared of the winter trail—'specially Dutch. Yet it's only three hundred miles or so. Why, the dogs would pack it in a week and wonder why they weren't allowed to stretch themselves. Double that for storm. The round trip would be a month on top of the snow against two in summer. I'll try it out right after this year's freeze-up."

It was all said with studied assurance. But Mary knew it was now or never. Her present safe return was an asset whose value she fully appreciated. She had no intention of dissipating it. Father Dan's protest was instant. His face was a study in incredulity.

"No, no, child," he said, sharply. "That's madness. Rank madness! Winter up there! You just don't know what it means."

"Don't I, Daddy?" Mary's wide-eyed smile was one of sheer cajolery. "There's nothing Big Waters can show worse than the lake here in winter, when it's storming. It's not craziness. True. True! It's not the craziness of a red-head

foolishness packing a thousand miles south in the dead of winter. And that didn't do any hurt."

"But you—a girl! A—a kid! It would be criminal to let you make it. Why not wait? Wait till Andy ——"

"You know, Daddy," Mary broke in with her little laugh, "it's an awful responsibility being born a girl. You got to be so careful all the time. You got to act so the folks around you don't have to worry for you. You see, they guess you got to set around so you don't fall and hurt yourself. Being a girl you get your nose wrung, and your hair braided, and your teeth scrubbed, and you're washed like everything. You mayn't eat too much, case you get like Jean Hesther, and you've got to get fixed with ribbons you're scared to get mussed. Then clothes! My! Everything you wear makes it harder to get around. It's—it's—all foolishness. Now a boy. No one cares how he falls around. His hair don't need braiding or ribbons. He can fight, and eat, and act crazy all the time. Think of Andy's red head. Could you comb it with a horse rake? Look at his freckled face. Wasn't it always grinning and dirty? Fight? Yes, all the time, if he fancied it. I mayn't scrap. And I want to—like—like a wild cat. And school? Andy gets real knowledge. But a girl just sits around and doesn't learn anything that's any use to anyone anyway. A boy can pack a thousand miles of snow and ice and storm. A grown woman's crazy when she wants to pack three hundred on the top of the snow, with a trail-man who could make the ends of the earth without a worry, and with the swellest dogs north of sixty. Daddy, my dear, lovely Daddy, whom I love, if I weren't as docile as a foolish rabbit, and as stupid as Jane Hesther, I'd get right out on the buck. I'd have open rebellion and set up a republic with no better authority than my own fool notions. Oh, dear! Big Waters! I've just *got* to make it on a winter trail to help a bunch of red hair that wouldn't know a gee-pole from a stick of cheap candy by now."

It all came with a rush—a rush that told of feeling that was hot with the rebellion Mary had talked of. There was laughter in it all, but it only emphasized the passionate feeling behind it. And Father Dan knew that those unknown parents on the desolate slopes of Unaga were urging the

girl. He recognized the character, the strength driving her. And as he did so he knew that she must have her way.

He capitulated at once. And, queerly enough, he did it with a joy that outweighed his fears. He told himself that every claim Mary had made for herself was justified and without exaggeration. His fears were the human fears of a man born to believe that woman needs his whole protection. But his joy was for the invincible courage and purpose he saw shining in the girl's big eyes.

"Just when do you start, kiddie?" he asked, his eyes twinkling. "Just when?"

Mary was back at the table on the instant.

"After the first real snow," she cried, eagerly.

"And you reckon a month?"

"The first trip."

"The first?"

Mary's eyes were dancing with mischief.

"I want to learn every foot of the way. Every risk, danger. So there can't be a thing to stop Andy when he gets after his—millions."

Father Dan nodded. Mary reached out. One brown hand passed across the table and laid for a moment on the big hand of the man.

Father Dan was thinking of Andy. When Andy came he would be a man. Mary was a woman. A woman with eyes and looks to stir any youthful pulse. Andy was from a city. Mary was of the outlands. Would Mary's unspoken dreams come true? Or would it just be the continuation of the old companionship, and—nothing more?

Mary watched the approach of Lola and her blue eyes hardened perceptibly.

Lola. Lola out in the open. Lola away from her store. It would have been startling had Mary not understood. Mary was at the landing alone. Oolinak had gone off to shape two new ribs for the boat to replace two which had suffered damage.

Mary pretended to be preoccupied with her boat, but her whole attention was on the woman making her way among the rocks of the foreshore. She saw that Lola was without

headcovering, and her dark hair was glossy in the sunshine. She smiled as she noted the plump arms flailing at the fly and mosquito swarms pursuing her. She saw the swift upward glance at the sun. Oh, no. Lola was not happy in making her visit. And Mary understood that it was the result of a hurried, urgent decision.

Benjie, at Mary's side, first whimpered and then snarled. And Mary used these things as an excuse for discovering her visitor. She stood up, a picture of alert competence in her mannish trail clothes.

Lola gave no heed to Benjie's snarling. She came straight up to the girl and the smile of her dark eyes was well-calculated as she beheld the pretended astonishment on Mary's sun-tanned face.

"Why, Lola, this is a break for you," Mary cried at once. Then she laughed slily. "You haven't left Jean to make trade? My word! Jean! Or Dutch!" She shook her head. "I can't see Jean paying out yards of cotton. And Dutch? Why, Dutch would forget that liquor was for trade!"

Mary's laugh was sufficiently disarming. But her thrust went home as it was intended to. She saw the smile fade out of the dark eyes. She saw the set of the hard mouth. She realized a movement of the strong hands that shut tight. For a moment the girl thought of the fight she had told Father Dan she was yearning for. She wondered.

But Lola stifled her resentment under the needs of the moment.

"Ther's no liquor trading goes on at the Fort," she said, coldly.

"No. Of course." Mary made a great pretense of a sigh. "You know, Lola, the sickness on the south shore's ter'ble. It's just fool work making trips from here. We ought to set our Mission up right there. It needs us all the while. It's flooded with liquor, too. And now there's a lodge of Yellow Knives camped less than twenty miles from the Caribou-Eaters. They're camped on Cape Flan. It means serious trouble, seeing the Caribou's reckon it's their hunting ground. That, and the liquor together."

Mary was talking with purpose. Lola was narrowly

watching her. And something of Mary's clean-cut, business-like appearance seemed to impress the older woman.

"You know, Mary," Lola said, quietly, "you're all sorts of a kid. You certainly are. I guess Father Dan ought to be mighty thankful having you around to do his work fer him. Summer an' winter you make the trail, like you was the missioner himself. You been two months gone."

Mary's laugh suggested she was flattered.

"It's a wonder I made back now," she said. "I wouldn't be only we got short on our outfit." Then she became thoughtful. "I'll need an oomiak when I make that way again. Or maybe I'll haul an outfit of stores in winter with the dogs. It's quicker. Easier."

Lola gazed out across the river.

"That's so," she admitted. "An' it's winter those Neches need most help. I haven't heard of a thing amiss on that south shore since the ice went out. I made a big trade of stuff that must have handed them all they needed till next freeze-up. I h'ain't heard of no sickness, either. I should have, too."

Mary's smile was bland.

"Oh, it's not worse than usual. There's always sickness there," she said. "It's liquor. My! The shore's flooded with it. I've passed Daddy Dan a story for his reports to the police that ought to bring 'em along up on the dead jump."

"Father Dan makin' reports of—liquor?"

There was no mistaking the change of tone, of manner. Lola's eyes were hot. And Mary knew she had achieved her purpose.

"Daddy Dan figures to get a police post here quick. There isn't a thing doing here that doesn't go straight away to Sergeant Spence at Good Hope. They got their post there. And they're reaching out all the time. He doesn't see why this shouldn't be the next. You see," Mary went on, straining truth far beyond the limit, "when the new law gets busy it won't be fines for trading liquor to Indians. It'll be penitentiary. It'll be ——"

"Say, you can cut that talk right out!" Lola broke in furiously, and Mary wanted to laugh. "Ther's no liquor trade at Whitewater as I told you. An' you best watch your

step talkin' that way, an' makin' reports. If ther's liquor among the Neches, it comes from Good Hope wher' ther's a police post. That's wher' it comes."

"Sure it is," Mary's impish grin was infuriating. "Anything that gets to the Whitewater Neches comes through from—Good Hope."

"Tcha!"

Mary pointedly looked at the furious woman's clenching hands. Then she stroked Benjie's head. The dog's savage eyes were fixed on the angry trader.

But nothing happened. Lola glanced from the girl's smiling face to the watchful dog. Then she turned and moved off the way she had come, firing her last shot as she went.

"You watch your step, my girl," she snapped.

Mary made no reply. She had achieved her whole purpose and was very content. Lola had completely failed in the object that had brought her. She was returning no wiser as to Mary's journey than when she came. Mary patted Benjie very gently.

"You're getting old, boy," she said, "but you're a wonderful feller to have around when I got to say things."

Half the long morning had gone when Mary's next visitor appeared. She was squatting on an up-turned bucket at the water's edge, with Benjie still on guard. Father Dan was in the Mission House with his pupils, and Oolinak was still away up at his quarters. Mary was just sitting there, gazing out over the sunlit world, dreaming all the wonderful things which her journey to Big Waters had inspired. Then Jean slouched into view.

In a moment she was stroking Benjie, looking down at the dog, smiling and talking.

"Here's another, boy," she said, lifting the dog's graying lip and baring the great fangs it concealed. "They're vultures, old feller. And you'd love to tear 'em to small feed with your lovely white, strong teeth. So would I. But we mustn't. At least, not yet. No, we'll sit quiet and listen. And when we're through we'll set 'em packing. This one's not so smart as his Ma. But he's badder. Oh, yes! Now sit right there and watch."

"Hello, Jean! What's brought you around?" she greeted the man coldly as he came to a halt, his pale eyes searching down at her. "You yearning to know about the Neches on the south shore like your Ma? Well, I can tell you this, the liquor along that shore's enough to float a kyak. And if there's a mix-up between the Caribous and the Yellow Knives before summer's out, the police'll know who's responsible for it."

The man shook his head while his eyes stared.

"I don't care a curse."

"Your Ma does."

Jean's eyes were transferred to a regard of the dog at the girl's side. They were quite expressionless.

"Wher' you bin?" he demanded, thrusting his great hands into the waist of his trousers. He had stepped nearer, and stood towering over the sitting girl.

Mary looked up and the devil was in her smile.

"Best get back where you were, Jean. Benjie hates folks stepping near me."

"He ken go on hatin'," Jean said.

The hand on Benjie's mane moved. In an instant the dog's fangs were bared. He was right on his toes, his mane bristling, and his furious snarl was the ugliest thing an unarmed man ever listened to. Jean moved back.

"Wher' you bin?" he asked again. And Mary laughed.

"That's twice you asked. Best ask again. Three's lucky."

"I don't hev to. You bin to Big Waters."

It was a shock. But Mary betrayed no sign.

"You best have asked a third time," she laughed. "I said three was lucky. Try the south shore where you Ma's flooding the Neches with liquor."

Jean shook his head.

"You don't double-rib your kyak for the south shore. You don't set an inch of tar to a new bottom fer the lake. You made Big Waters. It takes two month—about."

Mary's eyes were dancing.

"Tell me some more," she cried. "That dead fish is getting to life. It'll get quite bright if it's not careful."

The hand on the dog never left its mane. It was gripping it tight. But it was ready to release it on the instant.

The man's gaze turned up-river at the distant hills. Its expression remained unaltered. But somehow its direction bared more of the lower whites of his eyes. Mary felt she had never seen anything quite so evil, quite so insane as those eyes. And a little shiver passed down her back for all the heat of the day. After a few moments the pale eyes were stonily regarding her again.

"You're a crazy slut. More crazy than you know. You can't ever git the stuff you reckon's lyin' around up there. An' if you did you wouldn't hold it five minits. I ast you to marry me. I gave you that chance. That way you'd handle all you need of it. You reckon I'm a dead fish. I'm live, I tell you, an' you're goin' to know it. You stand clear of Big Waters, or ——"

"Where there's no millions since you folks have collected them," Mary laughed. "Oh, you're bright all right, Jean. Bright as a glacier in the sun, an' as much sense. Now beat it quick. I'm goin' to let go of Benjie. You got two seconds to make it. Now."

Mary stood up holding fast to a snarling fury. And she laughed derisively as the man turned and hurried away. Then she sat down again and calmed the savage beside her.

But she did not remain long. Jean's hurry carried him quickly beyond the point, and a few minutes later she saw another figure appear around it. It was Dutch Deazel, and the sight of him inspired a swift decision. She turned to her dog.

"No, boy," she said, with a chuckle, "I can't stand for any more. That feller makes me feel sick when he gets around. And he'll have his guns with him. And I can't afford to risk you. They know where we've been. That's all right. If they could follow you on a winter trail, it wouldn't be. Come right on. We'll beat it to home."

It was evening. Mary was sitting beside the smolder of fire which Jane Hesther had insisted on lighting. She had just finished another reading of her letter from Andy. Father Dan was stretched out on his bunk reading. Mary glanced across at him as she returned her treasured letter to its hiding-place.

"They've been gathering around, Daddy Dan," she said, quietly. "The—the—vultures."

Father Dan sat up, and laid his book aside.

"Vultures?"

Mary nodded.

"Lola Duchette. Jean. Dutch Deazel. This morning. One after the other. Party visits. I was the party."

"They suspect?"

There was anxiety in the question.

"They know."

"How?"

Mary shrugged her slim shoulders. Then she chuckled gleefully.

"There'll be doings when Andy gets along."

Father Dan shook his graying head. His eyes were unsmiling and his words came with deep gravity.

"We'll have it all over again. All of it. First Larry, now Andy. And all for what?"

"Millions!"

Mary's big eyes were shining.

CHAPTER XI

THE HOME-COMING

Andy would reach home by the second freeze-up from the date of his letters. That meant there was the rest of the summer lying ahead. There were six long months of black, Arctic winter to be lived through. Then, after that, another whole summer. Andy would be a fully grown man. He would be qualified in his profession. And, if the portent of his early youth were any indication, he would return to Whitewater with the fixed determination to claim an ominous heritage, the possession of which would be desperately disputed by those whose utter lack of scruple would carry them to any and every length.

This, with all its deadly possibilities, was the outlook of Father Dan. But beyond that one expression of feeling, at the moment when Mary warned him that her visit to Big Waters had been discovered by those at the Fort, he per-

mitted no sign of the anxiety oppressing him. He just settled himself down to watch and wait, and be ready to take such action as any threatening position arising might seem to warrant.

In spite of his gravest doubts, however, that long-awaited home-coming was a source of real happiness to Father Dan. He longed for it while he feared for it. And his longing was as much for Mary's sake as to satisfy his own love for the boy. The queer perversity of his celibate life had brought him a little family of two creatures whom he regarded as though they were offspring of his own sturdy body. Mary was the love of his life, since he had raised her from a babe. But Andy, for himself, and for the sake of his dead father, occupied a place in his affections second only to that of the girl.

Then he knew all the boy meant to Mary. He knew, how, in her heart, she had builded on his return to her. He knew that her whole being was absorbed in the love of her early childhood's days. So, with all his might, he suppressed his own fears, and refused henceforth to utter a word or warning that might possibly bedim the shining prospect of Mary's great looking forward.

From that first moment he just went on with his Mission labors in the serene and purposeful fashion habitual to him. And only his eyes were wide open, and his keen mind was alert for anything that might threaten the two young lives that were so precious to him.

Father Dan had burned the boats of his authority in the matter of the queer little schemes and plans he knew Mary to have prepared on behalf of Andy. Rightly or wrongly he had taken a decision to leave her with a free hand until such time as Andy returned to take matters into his own. And his arguments in arriving at his decision were clear and characteristic, and not without shrewd understanding.

The girl was a product of the North. That she was brimfull of mentality and initiative he had known from her earliest days. There was serious, thoughtful purpose behind her every act, and that in spite of the smiling humor so rarely absent from her frankly gazing eyes.

But there was more to her than that. There were the big

courage and hardihood which came down to her from those wanderers on the terrible plateau of Unaga. And there were a primitive loyalty and devotion in her that would drive her to the ends of the world, taking any and every risk, for those upon whom she had set her heart.

He felt that to cramp and restrict such a spirit would be a crime of the first magnitude. It might lead even to sheer disaster. Then, too, he felt, though Mary hugged her objects to herself, the simple fact that she saw their necessity meant they were vital in their service to Andy in that troublous time which he knew was yet to come.

He loved the simple courage of it all, the real capacity of that slim creature who spurned the protective hand which her sex seemed to demand. He gloried in the girl's devotion to the absent youth, whom she had set up as her idol. He could not, would not deny her, at whatever pains to himself.

But when the days shortened down, and a heavy, tired sun could do no more than just lift itself above the skyline for a few brief hours; when the temperature dropped to zero and below it, the winter gales began to howl down out of the north, and he saw Mary and Oolinak hardening the dogs and themselves for the winter trail, he found it difficult enough to adhere to his decision. Day in, day out, running far into the darkness of that night which was already of nearly twenty hours' duration, those two were at work. And back there, among the sheds behind the Mission he knew the winter sleds were standing ready, and the stout harness was in place waiting for the hardened team.

Then, at last, came that unforgettable night when Jane Hesther had cleared the supper things away, and Mary was squatting Indian fashion over the blazing log fire, staring into it with thoughtful smiling eyes. Father Dan was beside her on his old stool with his inevitable book. He had looked up at the sound of a rush of wind about the angles of the hut.

Mary, too, had turned, flushed and eager, toward the door as it creaked under the omen of storm. She waited only for a second rush of wind before she turned again to the fire with a little laugh.

"If it keeps up, and blows good, we'll start right out to-

morrow," she cried, happily. Then she glanced up slily at Father Dan. "I began to be scared it would never storm again—ever. Oh, dear! We've been waiting and waiting!"

Father Dan made no attempt to conceal his anxiety.

"But you'll wait till the storm blows out, kiddie," he said. "You won't pull out in a fog of snow. That's unthinkable. It would be—crazy."

Mary released her brown hands from about her buckskin-clad knees and held them to the fire. She shook her fair head.

"But we want the storm, Daddy," she said, quietly. "We've waited a week hoping to get it. We need it to pass the point, out on to the lake. It's our only chance of the folks not seeing us. There isn't a worry, Daddy. True. Benjie's our loose lead, and he'd make it blindfold. My," she cried, holding up a warning hand. "Listen to that. It's —it's—*swell*!" Then she laughed again with that happy chuckle of hers. "You'll eat your breakfast alone tomorrow, my Daddy, darling."

And the girl's prophecy was fulfilled. Father Dan ate his breakfast alone, and after that, in unbroken succession, many more breakfasts alone.

That had been a bad morning for Father Dan, and yet it was not without its little thrill—a thrill that set his pulses leaping. The tally of Father Dan's years was growing, but the spirit of the man was unimpaired. And, in spite of his anxious concern, it responded to the reckless spirit of Mary's youth.

In the early morning, beyond his doorway, was the blackness of night. Storm was howling about the Mission from seemingly every direction. The bitter air was filled with a driving fog of snow that did not come from above. And it was only the light of the oil lamp within the hut that revealed to him the laden sled, with its team of great huskies crouching down in the snow, and the dim outline of the squat, befurred figure of Oolinak standing at the tail of the sled.

Mary was ready, clad in her furs, standing on the wide spread of her native-made snow-shoes. Without a word she raised her arms and hugged the only father she had ever known. Then she passed out through the open doorway at once, and claimed the gee-pole from the waiting Eskimo.

Father Dan had no more than an indistinct vision of the rest. He saw Oolinak pass forward. He saw Benjie in his proud position of "loose lead" slash at the crouching team with his vicious fangs. Then he heard Mary's sharp cry, in a tone of unconcerned authority.

"Mush! Ho, you, Blaze! Ho, Pete! Black Man!"

Then she thrust her gee-pole as the dogs strained at their tugs. And the sled broke from the freezing grip of the snow.

The picture faded instantly. It was swallowed up in the black night of storm. Father Dan closed the door and fastened it, and, with a heavy heart, returned to his lonely breakfast.

Then came another night of storm, some four weeks later. It *was* night. Somewhere after midnight. And Father Dan was in his blankets with only the blaze of his hearth fire to light the room. But it was not the drive of a merciless blizzard—only a silent, heavy snow-fall, undisturbed by a breath of wind, and it had already continued for two days.

The man was awakened by a sound. It penetrated his light, dreamless sleep and stirred him to complete wakefulness. It was the plaintive dog whimper of huskies on the run. It seemed to come from the eastern side of the hut. It came only once though he listened intently for its repetition.

After awhile he closed his eyes again, and instantly forgot.

Then he found himself wide awake again, sitting up in his bunk. A moment later he had leaped from his blankets and pulled on his furs. Again it was that train dog whimper. But it was louder now. Then, too, its direction had changed. Now it came from the western side of the Mission.

Father Dan had lit his oil lamp. He moved across to the door and flung it wide open. As he did so, in the queer hush of the falling snow, the slither of sled runners came to him out of the night. It came with a louder whimper of dogs. It came, too, with other sounds. Then, in a few seconds, the train ran into the beam of lamplight lying athwart the snow, and Mary's sled drew up at the doorway.

Mary wiped the snow from about her mouth, and rid her furs of the ice congealing her collar. Then she dashed the

snow from about her eyes which beamed up at the great figure silhouetted in the lamplight.

"A day under schedule, Daddy," she cried, with her gleeful laugh. "And we'd have done better but for this soft snow."

It was the spirit behind those first words of greeting that silenced the expression of heartfelt thankfulness the man had been about to utter.

That was the first of five long, desperate, hard-fighting trips that used up the whole of Mary's winter. The full story of those trips was never told. Oolinak had no reply to the multitude of questions which Jane Hesther hurled at him without scruple, and Father Dan forebore.

Mary just smiled on each return and went about her work, which was now wholly the care of her beloved dogs. Benjie suffered such a wealth of solicitude as in all his savage life he had never known.

At no time given to unnecessary speech, Mary grew more and more silent and secretive as each trip was successfully accomplished. Only once did she give Father Dan an inkling of the desperate nature of the physical struggle of the thing she had undertaken.

It was the night before she set out for her fifth and final trip. Winter was nearing its close. There was, at most, something less than two months before the sun would contrive to lift its pale face above the skyline. In consequence, the girl's mind was not without a shade of anxiety.

So far there had been no sign of any thaw, nor was there any relief from the night of it all except when the aurora filled the northern sky, and the stars stared out through the rarefied air which magnified their brilliance. But there could be no telling. An early spring—a sudden thaw—even the Arctic seasons had their vagaries. At any rate the storm Mary always awaited in which to set out was raging at the moment with a fury that satisfied the girl. And as she sat over the great hearth fire she nodded her approval.

"You know, Daddy," she said, abruptly, with a sigh, "the luck's been with me right along. Hark at that wind. It sounds like it would be glad to tear the roof right off us and

freeze the marrow in our bones. This winter's made me think a whole lot of foolishness. And I'll be glad to be through with it. No one can know storming till they been out in it weeks, can they? Till they're hundreds of miles from their home camp, with only a bunch of dogs between them and the end of things —— My! It's sort of lonesome and—ter'ble. It makes you feel God's pretty good to see you through, anyway. And your foolishness doesn't make you deserve it. It's the last trip, and I think I'm glad."

Father Dan laid aside his book.

"Must you make it, kiddie?" he said, gently.

Mary's smile came around at him at once.

"Did you weaken getting Andy boy through to Athaba when there was need for it?" she asked.

"Not seeing there was need for it."

"There's need for my last trip."

Father Dan gazed into the fire for some silent moments. Then his steady eyes surveyed the girl beside him with a pride he could never have put into words.

"Then I guess it goes," he said. "And," he added, "I don't need you to tell me."

"No. But I can tell you this. There's no foolery to Whispering Lake. I think I'm scared of Whispering Lake. Scared bad—like Oolinak. Maybe Andy'll be able to tell me when he comes. I don't know."

Mary passed a slim hand across her forehead. It was a gesture that suggested weariness. And Father Dan observed her anxiously.

"What's the—scare?" he asked, quietly.

Mary laughed. But it was a little mirthlessly.

"It was last trip," she said, and Father Dan realized a little movement of her body that betokened a shiver down the spine. "It was when Benjie got his pads badly frosted. And I'd had to take him off lead and pack him on the sled. We were on the lake and missed direction, which we wouldn't have done if he'd been running ahead. We were two days looking for our 'get-out.' That's when God was so good to us. There was nothing all the time but aurora, and all the stars in the whole world, and several mock suns. It shone almost like day. Well, we found our 'get-out' at last and

made it. And then it happened. We'd less than a hundred yards of the lake ice to reach the river course. There was a crash. Daddy, it was awful! It was like nothing I've ever heard. Thunder? It couldn't thunder like it. Guns? I don't know. It—it was like the whole world blowing up with dynamite. It was right behind us. And we were both staggered, and half crazed, and deafened, and the dogs ran and ran. We got to the river, and I stopped them. Then, in the light of the aurora, we looked back. Right across the lake it looked like a mountain of ice was rising, rising. It went up, up. Then it stopped. And with a deafening crash it dropped down again and lay flat and smooth as it had been when we'd passed over it. It made it all seem like it was just a dream. Think of it! That lake, I guess, is frozen to its bed. It lifted! A mountain of ice. My!"

Mary's final journey to Big Waters ended with the last storm of winter. It was a soft, melting storm, infinitely worse for dog and human to endure than any furious blizzard that ever blew out of the north. It was saturating. It was thawing. It was utterly rotting to the snow surface, and reduced the ice to a condition that came near to defeating the dogs. Nevertheless it was sufficiently blinding. And that was the girl's need.

She came off the lake and passed up the river to her journey's end without the smallest possibility of discovery by those with whom she was at war. But she was late. She was ten days over schedule. And there was not a dog in her team whose pads were not literally torn to raw meat by the glass-like edges of the broken, thawing ice. And the horror of gangrene was looming.

Benjie! It was only the savage leadership of the invincible Benjie which had brought the team through that last nightmare journey. Little better himself than skin and thick fur and bone, he had savaged the dogs along to the bitter end as though he understood his mistress's emergency. Crippled like the others, bleeding and suffering, he still fought with his vicious fangs for every last mile of the way. And he had triumphed.

It was the first time in his life that Father Dan had

beheld the breaking of Mary's confident spirit. It was not the final, awful struggle she had endured which brought it about. It was not weakness, or physical weariness. Nor was it the mental strain of those last miles. It was just the dreadful picture of her half-dead dogs, as they crouched down in the thawing snow beside their quarters, too weary, too indifferent even to lick the agonizing wounds of their lacerated feet. They were mere specters of the great team with which she had set out. Alone of them all Benjie still had strength and spirit left to lave his wounds.

Mary loved them all. They were savages to the bone, greedy, mean, and fighters every one. But not so to her. They were just the dearly loved four-footed friends of her young heart. And she made no pretense of hiding the weak tears which streamed down her pretty cheeks as she gazed upon the havoc she had wrought. The girl was beaten down by despair.

Mary's despair, however, was but momentary. It was a weakness followed by swift reaction. Within twenty-four hours of her return every dog was housed, its wounds were dressed, and, for once in its life its desire for food was satisfied. There was not a sound from the quarters behind the Mission except, perhaps, the plaintive whimper arising from happy canine dreaming.

Spring broke, to be followed almost instantly by the impulsive rush of flaming Arctic summer. Flood-water streamed through the world, and the spring freshet bored like a cataract down the usually lazy river. In something less than two weeks the last signs of winter were flushed clear, and a myriad hues of vernal color replaced them. It was the final lap of waiting upon which Mary entered with a smiling confidence.

Father Dan watched closely her untroubled eyes, and those pretty lips that were so tightly shut upon the emotions he knew to be stirring.

He was disturbed for a very plain and simple reason: Andy! He knew that every hope of the girl's life was centered about Andy. Was this girl to be lifted to that pinnacle of earthly happiness which the consummation of her devo-

tion to Andy must bring her? Or was she to know that disillusion which, in a moment, might change her paradise into an earthly hell? He could not tell; he dared not even attempt to solve the human problem of it all. And Mary? Mary gave him no help at all.

The nightless days rolled on. Summer reached its height and waned again with that intense rapidity with which the Arctic summer dies. Chill evenings came down out of the north. The sun, as it dipped toward the horizon, did little more than roll along the skyline with daily loss of power. Gray skies replaced that steel blue, while flies grew sticky, and the bloated mosquitoes more poisonous in their attacks.

Now Father Dan's nights over his hearth fire, with Mary dreaming her dreams into its happy blaze beside him, were given up to almost daily speculation. Would Andy come ahead of the freeze-up? Would he wait for the ice and make it by dog train? Would he come alone with a river man, making the trip of Silt Lake with all its possibilities? Or would he arrive with the freighter, Pierre Baudi, bringing up the winter stores for Lola Duchette?

It was quite impossible to tell. Andy had sent no further word. They must just watch and wait, and be on hand.

And so it came about, that, one bitter gray day, both were down at the landing, when, away up the river, the freighter's train of Indian-manned oomiaks came into view. Oolinak was there with them, and Jane Hesther's bulk dangerously swayed the landing under their feet.

Father Dan was anxious. Mary was gazing without any smile, but with all her young heart in her eyes. But it was left to the ready, if incoherent, tongue of Jane Hesther to tell the wonderful news.

"Us see 'em all that feller. Yes," she cried, nearly submerging the landing in her reckless movement. "Us see 'em all same lak him sun burn up all things bimeby not! So! Him red-head!"

And she pointed out a bareheaded figure in the distance, the lurid hue of whose flaming hair had just appeared around the river bend. Andy was at the bow of the last oomiak of the train.

CHAPTER XII

THE WOOD-STORE

"It's good! Good to be back—home."

It came with a breath of deep feeling, and the voice was low and not quite steady. Mary listened to it, her eyes shining with a glint of moisture in them. She was striving to prevent the development of foolish tears of delight.

They were foregathered in Father Dan's living room. There were the four of them, for Jane Hesther refused to be denied. Andy was squatting on a well-strapped leather trunk whose contents had cost him much joy in their collection since they represented offerings to his playmate from whom he had been separated so long. The others were standing around gazing down at him.

He was tall and straight and broad, like his father had been. These things were plain as he sat there. Nor was he dressed in city clothes, as Mary had pictured him. She had looked for a collar to his shirt, and a tie; for shined shoes and a crease down the legs of his trousers. Instead, he was clad in the hardest northern trail clothes under a thick reefer jacket which he had been able to procure at the railhead at Athaba.

Father Dan breathed no less deeply as he replied.

"We've waited nigh eight years for a sight of you, boy. It certainly is good to have you back!"

Mary said no word—she just stared and stared with devouring eyes. Jane Hesther hovered behind the others. She was reduced to complete silence. But the smile on her dusky face was never so wide.

It was a moment when words came with difficulty in a riot of feeling. Mary was watching those freckles which blotched the man's brow, his chin, his cheeks. They were no different from what she remembered so well. Then his lurid mass of hair, that was still as ruffled and unkempt as she always thought of it! And his vivid blue eyes, with their depths of laughter!

It was her Andy—the boy she had played with—pre-

cisely the same, except that he had grown so that he dwarfed her, and his shaven face told of his full manhood.

No, she had no desire to talk yet.

In his different way, Father Dan was no less stirred. His quick mind and observing eyes were appraising the man into which this son of his dead friend had developed. That which he beheld filled him with hope.

And Andy? The vivid blue eyes were laughing, and so was his heart. In eight years of college and intimate association with his father's relatives, he had made many friends. But, for the time, they did not exist. Here he was again with his beloved playmate, now a grown woman, still with that lurking smile in her lovely eyes which had haunted him through the years. As he gazed at her he wondered how he had never before realized the beautiful creature she was.

He remembered the thin, long, sun-burnt legs under the cotton garment which had served her for a frock. And here she was, clad in mannish garments that even enhanced the slim charms of her woman's body. It was all wonderful; it crowned his dreams of her in a way that was wholly unexpected. She was his Mary, and even in those first moments of reunion he knew that so it had always been. Mary was Mary. And for him there was only one in the whole wide world.

Father Dan glanced from the man to the girl, and back again at the freckled face and vivid head. And he became simply practical.

"We fixed another bunk, like mine, over against the kitchen wall, Mary and I," he said, pointing. "It won't be the sort you've been used to, boy," he added, almost apologetically. "But there's a good bunch of clean blankets to it. And we fixed a canvas bottom instead of wood. Do you guess you can sleep there? Or do you fancy your own old home?"

Mary broke in on the instant. Her manner was urgent.

"Andy belongs right here, Daddy!" she cried. "There isn't a home on Whitewater for him but this!"

Andy laughed.

"You hear that, Uncle Dan?" he cried, his folded arms hugging his big body with huge delight. "I'm to sleep right

here. Of course I shall! I'm going to sleep under the same roof as Mary, if—if that foolish nose of hers snores the place down."

It was the one touch needed. Mary chuckled with contentment. Her Andy had certainly returned to her.

In spite of the gray of winter frowning in the brief daylight, and the temperature always dropping and never recovering, those first days together were of summer happiness to Andy and Mary. These two had leaped back over the years, and everything else was forgotten.

Andy had to see everything, and Mary alone must show him. There was first the ageing Benjie and the multitude of train dogs which had so increased in numbers under Mary's authority. There were the old familiar spots on the river. There was the still barricaded home that had been his. Then there was Lola's old Fort, and Jean, and even the detestable gunman whose presence at the Fort after all the years seemed to disturb the laughing Andy not at all. He had to meet them all again.

Then there was the camp on the lake shore, now a permanent settlement and grown out of all knowledge. Andy's appetite for the things and people he had once known was insatiable. All the time he was going over the old ground they laughed and talked together, reminding each other of those kid's escapades of theirs that had been their childhood's joy. Never once did they permit word or sign of the thing which really preoccupied them both—Big Waters.

Then, at last, came the first real snowfall of winter—gray, depressing, silent, and without the lightest breath of wind. Father Dan was down at the shore camp, where so much of his work was now done among the brown-skinned papooses. Andy and Mary were left at the Mission to watch the falling snow from its open doorway.

Mary held out a bare hand with its palm wide open. A great snowflake settled upon it and almost covered it. She chuckled as she looked up at the tall creature beside her.

"Look at that, Andy," she laughed, mischievously. "Have you seen snow that size down—East?"

Then she wiped the moisture away, and Andy watched her

thrust her hands into her breeches pockets, cross her feet, and lounge against the door-casing in a mannish attitude.

"No," he said. "But," he added, slily, "I've quite a swell memory."

"You're college-bred—now, though."

Andy grinned at the girl's disdain.

"Sure. So was my dad."

There was a moment's silence, then the mischief in Mary's eyes deepened.

"That's so," she agreed. "But it's so queer. Don't you remember? You were to be a mighty trailman, like—like he was. And, instead, you've been getting soft at college, where you never saw snow like this."

Andy grinned back prompt retort.

"And you? You were going to be a trailman, too, with your wonderful Benjie. Are you?"

Mary nodded.

"There's not a thing from here to Big Waters I don't know," she said, soberly. "Benjie knows it, too. Even—Whispering Lake."

Andy forgot to grin. He just gazed out at the falling snow.

"So will I," he said.

"You mean ——?"

"I'm making Big Waters."

Mary, too, was staring out into the snow.

"That's why you came back? Just that?"

"Partly."

"Why else?"

Andy's grin suddenly came to life again.

"Oh, to see Jane Hesther, I guess."

Mary's laugh rippled joyously. Then it was gone. She turned abruptly and went to Father Dan's bookshelves.

"We've got that Bible, Andy," she said, over her shoulder. "They never suspected. At least, they didn't try to steal it. Here."

She held out the leather-covered volume and Andy took it.

"It's on the back page," she went on. "At the end. Just inside the cover."

Andy moved to the open door where the waning daylight

was sufficient for his purpose. Mary followed him. Mary's outward calm was wholly feigned. She was breathless with excitement as she watched Andy's eyes as they gazed down at the open page. She saw them widen.

It was a rough drawing, and Andy knew it had been executed by his father. It was crude enough. A young child might have drawn it. It was the outline of a bird obviously intended for a gull. It was perched on the apex of what looked like an inverted block letter V. But underneath the drawing was a series of letters, and what looked to Mary like two numerals among them which had dropped down out of alignment. It was these letters that appeared to have widened Andy's eyes.

The girl's pulses were racing. She was wondering about that knowledge. Did he possess it? Suddenly she became further aware of amazement now looking out of Andy's widened eyes—Amazement and excitement, too.

"God!"

"You know it?"

Mary only breathed her question. Andy made no reply. Instead, he suddenly ripped the page out of the book and looked around holding it up.

"That book was Mother's?" he asked. "He drew that for me? It's—it's mine, isn't it?"

As Mary nodded Andy tore the page into tiny scraps. Then he moved across to the fire. And he stood over it until the last scrap of paper was burnt out.

"Why?"

Mary was at his side, and her question came sharply.

"It's best," Andy said. "He said there were millions." Just for a moment he stood considering. Then: "Say, kid, wasn't there a bunch of outfit came down from Silt Lake? I kind of remember."

Mary was still gazing regretfully down at the fire.

"It's back in Jane Hesther's wood-store." Then came her laugh. "I stopped her burning it. It scared her. She said it was 'dead man's outfit.' 'Mush bad.' "

"What made you stop her?"

"It was yours. Will you see it now?"

Andy's smile was good to see. Suddenly he linked an arm under one of Mary's.

"Sure," he cried, walking her toward the door. "Say, kid, you're all sorts of a wonder!"

They were in the inner, the third room of the old woodstore with its gaping rents in the roof and the opening that had once framed a covered window. The waning daylight was sufficient to illuminate it. Mary was climbing over a pile of newly cut wood, tumbled just within the doorway.

Suddenly she began to laugh. It was queer how she wanted to laugh all the time now. But just at that moment a memory had come back to her.

"I was thinking of Jane Hesther," she said, in explanation. "She was so scared of your father's old outfit she fell over a pile of wood backing away from it. Do you remember how we used to push her over?"

"You did," came the prompt reply. But it came without responsive laughter.

Andy halted. He was facing the shadowed corner where the broken rope bindings, and the rotted rubber sheet which Mary had disturbed, revealed the big bundle of driftwood it contained. He stared down at it.

"Just that driftwood and nothing else?" he asked.

"Not a thing I could see. It's very rotten, too. Will you have Jane Hesther burn it now you've seen it?"

Mary slanted an intent, sidelong look at him. Once she swallowed with difficulty. Excitement was parching her throat.

Andy stooped. He picked up a largish block of the wood. Then he moved away so that he was under the light that came through the rent in the roof. Mary lost not a movement, not an expression of the man's eyes.

She saw him raise the ugly lump to his nose. At another time she would have laughed to see the way he sniffed all over it. But there was no humor in her now. She was wellnigh beside herself with expectation, with apprehension.

Then came a spasm of fierce disappointment. Andy looked up. He looked at her eager face. There was a flash of his grin in his eyes as he casually walked back to the outfit

and dropped the lump of driftwood back on the pile. In that moment Mary saw all the edifice she had built up crashing about her head. She could no longer remain silent.

"Well?" she whispered, and strove to moisten her lips.

It was moments before Andy replied. Then he shrugged. And Mary's heart sank further.

"It would have been a priceless fire if she'd burnt it," Andy declared, with a casualness he had difficulty in maintaining. "Thousands of dollars. It's—ambergris."

He refrained from looking around. He spoke as though the whole thing were of no import whatever. There came movement—a hand, a slim, strong hand, fell on his broad shoulder. It gripped it with a strength intended to hurt.

"I—I could kill you, you Andy!" Mary said. Then came her laugh. It was a laugh of such relief as she had never known. "Oh, Andy, you're bad! You haven't changed a bit!"

"Not to you—little kid—anyway."

Andy was grinning back at her with frank mischief.

"What's—what's—ambergris? Tell me quick, or—I'll go mad."

"About the most priceless stuff I know. Ambergris? I guess it's worth around twenty-five dollars an—*ounce*!"

Then he pointed down at the litter of it.

"That's ambergris—all of it. Driftwood? That makes me want to laugh. I guess there's maybe a hundred-weight and more there. And it certainly would have made an elegant fire!"

Mary had entirely recovered her calm. She smiled up into the man's blue eyes.

"Oh, Andy," she cried, with a big sigh of content. "It's wonderful! Too wonderful! Hundred-weights at—twenty-five dollars an—*ounce*! It's—it's —— But you haven't told me. What's ambergris?"

"Why, just whale junk. Sperm whale."

Mary seized him by the arm and shook it.

"You are a fool boy, Andy," she cried, half laughing, half in anger. "Why d'you stand there talking 'whale junk'? Tell me right. Can't you see I'm just crazy to know? What's ambergris? Why? How? Tell me right here and now."

Andy stared. The girl's sudden rush of fierce excitement

had startled him. It was so unlike Mary. He saw no sufficient reason for it. After all, it was only their discovery of a treasure they had always known to exist. It was only that he had been able to show her.

Suddenly he decided to drop all fooling, to take her seriously. He took out his pipe and filled and lit it. Then he indicated the wood-pile.

"Let's sit, kid. And I'll tell it you right," he said, seriously.

He sprawled himself on the wood, and Mary sat close beside him. She sat with knees drawn up and hugged in her arms. And she rocked herself as she listened without one word of interruption.

"Why, ambergris *is* just whale junk, truly," Andy began, quickly. "Sperm whale. And if it wasn't for that foolish sea-hog, I guess all the women in the world would go mighty short of the perfume they like doping themselves with. You see, ambergris is the foundation of all perfume folks use in the world today, and it's awful scarce. Now the sperm whale's a mighty big fish, and lives more years than you or I are likely to. And he doesn't make ambergris till he dies. I called him a sea-hog, and I guess he is. He's so big he can do most as he likes roaming about the seas. He belongs to the extreme northern and southern oceans, and uses the rest for his food hunting ground. Now, he's not content with the ordinary fare that swims about the seas. I dare say he swallows everything that comes along just to keep his works moving. But all the time he's looking for something succulent and dainty. Have you ever heard of cuttlefish? The giant kraken? That great squid that can throw a tentacle over a small skiff and drown the folks in it and then swallow them, absorb them. Well, that kraken is his dainty. He goes out in schools and hunts a nest of 'em out in tropic seas. Then the whole bunch of whales attacks the kraken, kills 'em all, and they gorge on their meat. They eat 'em all; every particle."

Andy paused and blew smoke. Then he went on with a laugh.

"You know, kid, the kraken is sort of made of jelly. Maybe that's why the sperm likes him. Sort of solid jelly.

All except his—beak. The thing's got a beak. And it's awful tough. Mr. Sperm eats beak and all. And after years of eating tough beaks he gets a mighty fine indigestion. And it goes on getting worse, because he hasn't sense to quit eating those beaks. He gets sick to death. He hunts back to his lair, or maybe his nursery ground, and moans about, getting sicker and sicker. Then he sort of blows up. Maybe it's wind or something. I don't know. Anyway, it's those beaks. He just bursts right up and dies. And when he bursts there's a great mass comes out of his belly—solid. It floats around. Looks like rotted wood, or peat, or any old thing but what it is. It's ambergris, and it's made entirely out of those krakens' beaks, and gastric juices and things. It drifts and drifts and never sinks. And it's only when somebody who knows it, like Father did, comes along and sees it that it's ever rescued to find its way to making perfume for women-folk.

"Do you know what I think, kid?" he went on, after a pause. "Why, Big Waters is just a whale nursery or—or cemetery that belongs to a mighty big school of sperm whales. You know, we think they're just fool fish, or mammals, or whatever they are, with no sort of sense but to eat kraken beaks. But they do have secret nurserys or cemeteries. They got plenty enemies they know about. And humans are among 'em. It just must be. They go there to die, blow up. And the place is littered with—ambergris. And dear old Dad located it, knew it, and jumped right in!"

He sat pondering a moment while he pressed his tobacco down in his pipe with a finger too big for it.

"And wasn't he bright about it?" he went on. "I mean handling it, marketing it? Those folks trailing him. Simon! Dutch! Those other two—the 'breed' and the Irishman! And—Lola! What a hope he gave them! Not an earthly! He just collected his treasure right under their noses while he camouflaged a bit. He didn't have a real worry. There it was just looking right at them. And—*they couldn't know it if they wanted to*! Look at it. Could you or I? Isn't it just old junk, sea-rotted driftwood? Shape, grain, color, except for black rings in it that might be anything? And it's dead as mutton, too. No. He knew, because he'd learned,

the same as I have. They hadn't. Why, maybe they've burnt chunks of it in their camp fires. Think of it! Those crazy crooks! Burning—ambergris!"

Andy flung up his hands at the thought. Mary looked up into his face with all her old humor.

"Oh, Andy, dear," she cried, reverting to her old childhood's manner of address, "he said there were millions up there."

Andy smoked and nodded.

"It's no wonder he fought for it."

"To the—death."

"And he left it for—me!"

Mary clutched the arm nearest her and squeezed it so that the man thrilled under the pressure.

"Then we —— Oh, Andy, we'll do like we always said we would when we were kids. You an' me. We'll blaze that long trail. The—the northern winter trail. You remember? We said we'd make a rich strike like your father did. Millions! And we'll mush my dogs and pack the trail. And—and you'll have to pay me for my team, as we said. You remember?"

Andy grinned, and nodded, and smoked.

"Yes. Five dollars a trip," he said.

Mary went on, chuckling her delight at the memory of it all.

"Millions! You'll be able to spare five dollars, won't you?"

Andy stood up abruptly and moved across to the pile of ambergris. He picked a lump of the stuff up and scrutinized it closely while Mary came and stood peering from behind him.

"It doesn't look worth five dollars," Mary tittered. "But you'll have to pay it. That was the bargain."

"Yes. Oh, I guess you can have your five dollars! But there was more to it than that."

There was a moment of silence while Andy prodded the queer stuff with a finger-nail and scaled a piece off. The hot youth of him surged to his head.

"Was there? What?"

It came in a queer, small voice.

"Why, we fixed it so we'd get married first so folks

couldn't say anything, us hitting the long trail together—alone."

Andy looked around. But he beheld only a hurriedly retreating figure scrambling its way out over the wood-pile.

CHAPTER XIII

OF ONE ACCORD

Lola Duchette was standing over the stove in her store. Her muscular hands were outspread to the glowing red patch in its iron top. Her dark eyes were profound with thought as they contemplated the glow of heat which was so comforting to the numbed condition of her fingers.

Once she shivered and glanced around sharply at the door. But it was tight shut against the depths of cold that lay beyond it. After awhile she rubbed her hands together and went back to her counter on which lay her large, open stock-book and a mass of papers. And, in a moment, she was at work again making rapid entries of the items of winter stores which had so recently arrived from Fort Good Hope. She worked on in that concentrated fashion which suggested no other thought in her mind but of the task before her.

The store was empty of all custom. There was not even a single loafing Indian, for it was that season when the men, and many of the women of the shore camp, were setting out to claim their winter harvest of pelts.

Once Lola looked up from her accounts with a sharp, sidelong glance at the storm-glassed window through whose thickly frosted panes the last of the brief daylight made its way. Then she reached up and turned up the wick of the oil lamp swinging above her head. It was snowing heavily outside, snowing great flakes in a world that at the moment was breathlessly hushed.

After awhile she flung her pen down, breathed on her aching fingers, slammed her stock-book shut, cleared away her papers and hurried across to the stove again. Just as she once more spread her chilled hands out to the warmth,

the door was thrust open to admit the snow-covered, befurred figure of her huge son.

"Well, did you get him?"

Lola's question snapped without friendliness. That was always her way with Jean. It was as though she hated the sight of him and only suffered his presence of necessity. Jean unfastened his fur coat, shook the snow from his storm collar, beat his fur cap clear of it, and wiped the frost from about his staring eyes.

"No, Maw," he said, in his surly fashion, as he stood dripping at the opposite side of the stove. "I said it warn't no sort o' use chasin' him around them tepees. He'll get around when it soots him an' not before. I just left word around."

The woman's eyes shone angrily.

"That bum's about the use of a wet week," she said, bitterly. "I'm sick to death of him. Eight years of—that! Well, he'll get busy now, anyway. You, too."

There was something compelling in the manner of it. This round, sturdy creature was infinitely more dominating than mere words suggested. Jean stared down at his mother without verbal reply.

"We're takin' no chances from now right on," Lola went on, quietly. "We just got to have it all ready to jump on the moment. I don't guess that feller's crazy enough to make a break in winter. He'll be soft as mush, from college," she went on, with a sneer. "But I talked to him right here in this store today, an' if he's not his rotten father over again, I ain't wise. It's in his laff. It's in them eyes of his. He's here to collect the stuff his father reckoned he'd left behind him, just as sure as we guess he won't. No," she mused, "it won't be till the ice goes out. You can't mine Big Waters under feet of snow. His father used the open only. But you'll need to stand by just the same, with the dogs and sled outfitted. And that bum needs to stand by, too, and cut out his foolery down at the squaw camp."

Jean moved his head slowly from side to side.

"You're wrong, Maw," he growled. "They'll make that trail atop of the snow."

Lola studied the expressionless face, the sight of which

gave her no maternal joy at any time. She was impressed by the confident tone, the deliberateness of the man's denial.

"How?" she demanded sharply.

"It ain't him. It's her. It's that bloody bitch an' her dogs. I watched. All last winter. I got her. She ain't fooled me. It's winter all right. An' it'll come quick."

"You're crazy!"

"I ain't, Maw."

At that moment the door opened and Dutch Deazel pushed his way in. He came over to the stove at once, and he eyed mother and son with swift, speculative glances. He stood there, heedless of the mass of melting snow on his furs, which promptly began to drip about his feet.

"In a hurry, Missis, ain't you?" he cried, roughly. "What's the hurry? Has he hit the north trail in—this?" he sneered. "Or has he got you rattled?"

Lola's eyes narrowed under the taunt. Her lips compressed. But she replied without heat.

"There's no one rattled, Dutch, unless it's maybe you," she said, quietly. "Maybe the thought you're goin' to start right in to earn your keep is rattlin' to a boy like you. You see, you're through with that squaw camp till the big play's done. It starts now. An' it goes right through to the finish. If you don't see things that way you can cut out here and now. An' Jean an' me'll be glad to pouch your share. You kind of need to remember the dogs are mine, the outfit's mine, an' you can't eat here without I say so. I'm makin' the 'ante.' An' if you want to come in, you'll need to match it. Well?"

Dutch laughed, but it was without any mirth, and his eyes were watchful. He looked from mother to son and back again to the mother as though appraising them both. What he saw seemed to afford him reason for ease of manner.

"Oh, I'll match your 'ante,'" he cried, with a pretense of geniality. "I ain't put in eight years of this cursed hell to fool things when they're breaking our way. You don't have to get rattled, Missis. Pass me the talk an' count me in—right up to the neck."

Lola nodded.

"That's all right. You'll stand by all day an' night with Jean to jump for it. The dogs need to be ready. An' the outfit. I don't guess he'll make a break till the ice goes. But Jean says this winter—right away quick."

Dutch turned from the mother to the son. And he remained observing the pale eyes, awaiting enlightenment.

Jean made a sudden gesture.

"What's the use?" he growled, in his harsh way. "You don't never quit your store, Maw. An' Dutch ain't got time but for the camp, an' the lousy women around it. I been watchin' ever since that gal started makin' trail."

"You surely haven't quit her since," Dutch jeered.

Lola's eyes flashed around at him, and a flush of anger slowly mounted to Jean's cheeks.

"She's white, anyway," he rumbled, furiously.

"Sure she is. Which don't say she's for you."

"Don't it?" Jean's lip lifted in a snarl.

"Quit, you blunderin' Swede!" Lola snapped. "The boy's got some hunch. Let's have it, Jean."

Jean's baleful eyes watched the gunman. From that moment they never left his face the whole time he was talking.

"I tol' you way back summer before last that gal made Big Waters in her double kyak with Oolinak. You sed I was crazy then. She did tho'. They double-ribbed it against the heavy waters. They set a new bottom over the old one that was sound. An' they laid it with a dope of tar, nigh an inch of it. They was away up Flood River two month. An' she had that dog of hers with her. Do you know why?"

"She's crazy for him," Dutch said, with a shrug.

"Sure she is," Jean agreed. "But that wasn't the reason. The reason come with the freeze-up last year. He was loose lead to her team for a trail *he'd learned.* She pulled out—on Mission work—five times that winter. South shore? Not on your life. She was trailing the whole winter. An' she got back just before the ice went with her team beat to death, an' without a foot among 'em that wasn't raw meat. She was bright, too. She made out when it was storming. An' she come back the same. Why? To make the south shore?" The man's head moved in its deliberate negative. "That wench knows the winter trail to Big Waters like she was

reading a book. So does that dog of hers. An' that's what she was doin' sure as hell. Learnin' it. Learnin' it all, so that bloody red-head can make it on a winter trail—an' fool us."

Jean turned on his mother.

"You guess I'm crazy, Maw," he cried, harshly. "You always guess that way when I don't see like you. You best get it now the only crazy folk around this layout is just them who figger that woman ain't fixed things to make a break for those millions at Big Waters on top o' the snow. I owe her. An' I'll pay her. Oh, I'll pay her! I don't care what in hell Dutch reckons, or you either, Maw. She ain't goin' to get away with it, if I don't sleep till the ice goes out."

The mother's eyes remained on her son. In that moment she was thinking of the man, who, when he passed out of her life, took with him all that was worth while in her. Now, for the first time since the news of his death reached her, she realized he had left something of himself behind. She forgot to sneer at the boy. In fact, there was a light in her eyes that was wholly unusual to them.

Dutch, too, was regarding the man from a fresh angle, but his regard was more obscure. Dutch had only one purpose, one objective—the well-being, the satisfaction of Dutch. He had waited around for eight years on a chance that had looked fairly hopeless. Well, now the moment had come when chances were looking better, he was in more than a receptive mood. He abruptly impelled himself to a better manner.

"Say, boy," he cried, with a rough cordiality, "I guess you've hit it! That dame ain't made that trail without a mighty big notion lying behind it. She's figgerin' to pull a swell bluff on us. Let her!"

Lola turned.

"He's pulled you right over, hasn't he?" she asked, ironically. Then she turned on the silent Jean. "It sounds good. Sounds fine. An' it looks just the way you've said. You've been smart. Right smart till—you get down to the bottom of it. I told you, an' I still tell you, neither that girl nor Andy Forsyth, with all his knowledge, can mine Big Waters

under drift snow bankin' fathoms deep at forty below zero. An' Larry Forsyth mined. Don't be fooled. Larry mined. Dutch has reason to know. You figger they're makin' it atop of that snow. I figger they're not crazy. But, anyway, there'll be no chances. Winter, or in the open, kyak or dog sled, when they pack that trail we're goin' to be atop of 'em all we know."

Jean nodded an approval that was almost smiling.

"That goes, Maw," he said. "Only we'll be on the trail with the first storm that blows."

CHAPTER XIV

ANDY'S WOOING

ANDY had followed Mary from the wood-store without the smallest hesitation or compunction. He was completely master of his own purpose, and went about it with the same deliberateness which had been such an essential characteristic of his father.

Mary had reached the Mission through the heavily falling snow well before he did, and when he pushed his way in through the closed doorway, the girl had disappeared. He glanced around swiftly and saw that the door of Mary's room was tight shut. And his blue eyes began to grin.

There was just a moment while he gazed at it. Then he moved quickly across to his bunk that stood against the dividing kitchen wall. He stooped down and reached underneath it. He pulled out the strapped leather trunk which he had stowed and kept hidden there waiting for what he considered to be the psychological moment. He felt he could not have found a better moment than the present.

He hauled out the precious trunk, moved over to Mary's door, and set it down, lumping it heavily against the barrier the girl had set between them. Then he called to her in the old dictatorial fashion of childhood.

"When you feel like getting out of that moldy hiding-hole of yours, and remembering we got a lot to talk and plan, just be careful. There's something set by your door that'll fall and maybe hurt your big feet."

Then he squatted on his lean haunches before the blazing hearth fire and grinned at the flames.

Father Dan had not yet returned from the shore camp, and Andy had no expectation of him till nearly supper-time. So he was well enough content. As he sat there grinning, and smoking, and thinking, and listening, all the old joy of his early boyhood came back to him. What the future held he did not much care just then. That life down East was behind him, and he had Mary with him again was all-sufficient.

The idea of it all made him want to laugh right out. He thought of the wonderful parties he had enjoyed while at college—scores of them. He thought of all the amazingly attractive girls he had mixed with. He thought of their brightness and their smart frocks. Alluring creatures, fresh and young like Mary, but sophisticated to the last degree. And he shook his obstinate red head and his smile died out.

Oh, yes, they were all sorts of wonderful creatures. But he could not see one of them fleeing headlong when a man talked marriage to them.

He drew a deep breath. The years meant nothing to Mary but that her natural character and personality had grown with her body. She was as undifferent as the snow which fell each year, and maybe as pure. Years ago she had claimed his boy's love, and it had grown with him to his manhood. There had been no glamour during all his college years alluring enough to obscure from his persistent mind the long-legged image of Mary in her tattered frock.

He listened to the sounds about him. There was the tuneless crooning of Jane Hesther in the kitchen. There was the comforting snapping of burning logs, and the frequent hiss of melted snow as it fell in through the smoke hole in the roof. Then there were sounds of movement in Mary's room.

Presently his grin returned. It was a footstep in Mary's room and it was moving toward the door. He rubbed his hands and held them to the fire. And, with boyish delight, he reminded himself of feminine curiosity.

The door opened cautiously. He saw it from the corner of an eye. It opened wider. A bare, round arm reached out. A moment later the leaning trunk had vanished within, and

the door was shut again. He called out with laughter in his voice.

"That's for you, Mary," he cried. "Sort of present from down East. And if you don't think a deal to it maybe you'll remember I been worried to death all the way packing it up here so I kept it dry. I unlocked it for you. It's just strapped. You best open it right away and put on a frock. The blue one. I chose that. You see, I can't marry a feller in buckskin breeches and snow-boots, can I?"

Andy's eyes were dancing with the mischief of it. It seemed to him at that moment that his long banishment from his old playmate was being amply made up for.

He smoked on. And, in the silence, the laughter died out of his eyes. Then, presently, he heard queer little inarticulate ejaculations coming from behind the door. They thrilled him with a joy that flooded his big being. They told him so much. He knew by those sounds that all the woman in Mary was ravished by the lavish thing he had done. He smoked furiously, and passed a big hand back over his forehead.

Then came Mary's voice.

"Ho, you Andy! Tell me. How did you make out so the shoes would fit?"

The opportunity was too good to miss. With a chuckle of renewed laughter Andy called back on the instant.

"That's my clever Auntie," he cried. "I just told her you were like the squaws and Eskimos and hadn't been raised to shoes except moccasins and things. I said you were lank and bony, and you'd big feet anyway, and were hoping to get like a woman when I got back. So she just figured hard and took a hell of a chance."

"It's swell someone in your family having brain!"

"Ye-es. She talked of my want of brain when I asked her to choose a real swell outfit for the girl I'm going to marry."

There was no reply. But, listening, Andy caught the sound of the familiar happy chuckle. He was more than content. Then came more indeterminate sounds—rustlings, and vocal explosions. And, after awhile, Mary broke silence again.

"Oh, Andy, this—this lovely blue frock! It's ——"

"Put it on."

The order was in Andy's best manner. It was exactly the tone he would have used more than eight years ago. And he waited for a Mary-like retort. But none was forthcoming at the moment.

It was quite a while before Mary spoke again.

"Andy, dear," she said, at last, "where did you get your swell notions of color? I'd have guessed you'd be crazy for—red!"

"Oh! Would you?" Andy chortled. "Well, I'm not. I got my notions from swell parties where there were heaps of swell girls. Good-lookers, too."

Andy's delight was consuming. Suddenly he stood up and gesticulated at the closed door with his pipe.

"Now, see right here," he cried. "You've had plenty time fixing yourself. If you don't come out where I can see you I'll haul you out by your scrag of tow hair."

He was still standing there before the closed door, preparing further violence of language, when it opened. It opened wide, and Mary stood framed in it. Andy stared. He drew a sharp breath as he gazed on the amazing picture the girl made in the yellow light of the lamp.

In all his years of memory of Mary he had never pictured anything like that which he now beheld. How could he? The little creature he had loved had been all angles, and bones, and tattered frocks, and sun-burn. Now he saw a slim, graceful creature in a knee-length frock of the palest blue, wearing flesh-tinted silk stockings of the most exquisite texture. She was standing in strapped, high-heeled shoes which added to her slim height, and about her was a gracious femininity which robbed him of all desire for any more of the girl-and-boy fooling that had always been their way.

But it was the sweet, weather-tanned face that held him—the oval of it, so perfect in its framing of a mass of loose, fair hair which hung far below the girl's shoulders—her glorious blue eyes, with their haunting, wise little smile; the rounded cheeks; the full, ripe lips so wonderfully molded, and yet so full of decision, firmness. This was a new Mary.

This was not only the Mary he had always determined to marry, but a Mary for whom his desire and love knew no bounds.

Mary's triumph was complete. It was there in his silence, in the love shining in his eyes. Did she realize it? If she did, she gave no sign of it in the frank delight with which she gazed up at the amazing red head and the massed freckles. But perhaps she did—that little smile hid so much.

But even in that moment of realization the happy bond of *camaraderie* between them could not be wholly shut out. Andy began to grin with all his old mischief. He reached out with two hands, and they seized the girl almost roughly by the shoulders. He felt the soft flesh under his strong grip, and its touch ravished him. Then came his laugh, full of a happiness no words could have expressed.

"Say, Mary!" he cried. "I'm going to kiss you if—if it kills me!"

And he kissed her. He held her in spite of her half-hearted struggle while he kissed her on the lips he coveted, on the cheeks that were flushed scarlet under the process, on the forehead which frowned with pretended resentment. He kissed her many times. And then he stood back and laughed at her flaming face.

"Say, kid, it's no sort of use being mad with me," he cried, thrilling and irresponsible. "I been waiting to kiss you that way eight years. You just can't stop me! I kissed you because you're going to be my wife, and—and it hasn't killed me! Say, we always shared most things together away back. I guess we'll share this. Now you can step right up and—kiss me!"

Mary laughed, and all the heart of her was in the sound of it.

"Oh, Andy, dear," she cried. "Not with those—those freckles. And that—that scarlet head! You can't—you just can't ——"

"But I can! And I'm waiting. Here's my face. Get right up on Uncle Dan's stool, and—kiss it."

Mary's gurgle was full of impishness. Suddenly she reached up two hands.

"I don't have to get that stool, you fool boy," she cried.

Her hands grabbed the very roots of his mop of untidy hair and she mercilessly pulled his face down to hers and kissed it. It was at the moment she was caught up in Andy's arms that the snowy figure of Father Dan pushed its way into the room.

"Say! Andy! Mary!"

In an instant Andy had released his bear-like hug. They stood side by side, hand in hand, just like the two guilty children of old, that Father Dan remembered so well.

It was a moment of shock, and the old priest's exclamation told of his scandalizing. Yet his deep-set eyes had little in them that was condemnatory. On the contrary, the two pairs of eyes regarding his rugged, lined face realized a half smile in them that was simply questioning.

Quick as a flash Andy spoke, in no uncertain fashion.

"Please, Uncle Dan, don't be angry," he said, with a laugh. "It's not Mary's fault. I brought her these—these clothes and things, and made her put them on, and then I couldn't bear the sight of them, so I had to kiss her. Now —now we want you to—marry us. Mary's not saying a lot, but she's thinking hard. She hasn't said she wants to marry me. But she does, all right! You see, she promised me when we were kids, and I promised her. And those promises still stand now we're grown. That's so, isn't it, Mary?" he said, prodding the girl unceremoniously with his elbow. "You say some, kid! You can't expect Uncle Dan to accept my uncorroborated testimony."

Mary slanted a quick look at the mass of grinning freckles. Then her solemn eyes turned on Father Dan.

"I'm almost sure he's speaking truth, Daddy Dan," she said, with the glimmer of a smile.

"Almost?"

It was irresistible, and Father Dan smiled away every doubt. Very deliberately he unfastened his furs, shook off the mass of melting snow, removed them, reached his stool and set it before the hearth fire.

"Just come right here and sit, you two crazy kids," he said. "Then you can tell me."

But Mary protested. As Andy sought to lead her for-

ward, with an eel-like twist, she released herself and made for her room.

"I just can't sit around on that floor in—in this lovely—lovely frock! And you wouldn't take notice of anything I said, me looking all—all soft and foolish."

The door shut behind her, and Father Dan smiled at the discomfited Andy.

"The kiddie's right," he said. "We need a big talk. Come and make it."

Andy was cross-legged on the ground beside Father Dan's stool. He was heavy with thought, and his eyes were sober. Father Dan was deeply stirred by this great new thing that had come into his life.

"You see, Uncle Dan," Andy said, after he had considered the leaping flames for some doubtful moments. "I didn't just come up here for that other. I—I came for—Mary. She's your little kid in a way. I know that. And maybe I know something of all she means to you. I feel like I'm going to rob you, and I don't want to rob you of a thing in the world. You look on Mary as a sort of kid still. Maybe I do. But she's all a woman. And all her life she's never, never seen a thing but Whitewater. Not a thing else."

Andy paused, eyeing the man beside him.

"I know you, Uncle Dan," he went on, after a moment. "And I know it would break your big heart to think of Mary going through all her life knowing and seeing nothing but—this. That's why I'm not scared asking you. I sort of love the ground that kid walks on. Guess I always have. I got all the money my poor dad handed to me. And there's—millions—more. I can show Mary a time, and I will! And we can come back and back, so you won't have to miss her. We want you to marry us—right away. There's Oolinak and Jane Hesther can witness. And you're a real priest of the church. You—you will, won't you?"

The forthrightness of the man was compelling in its appeal. To Father Dan it was irresistible. He let a hand fall on the broad shoulder beside him. And there was a great affection in the eyes that turned on him.

"But why—right away?"

Andy raised a whimsical smile to the rugged face.

"It would be easy to tell you all sorts of reasons," he said. "I could tell you we fixed it that way when we were kids, so we could go a long trail together without—impropriety," he laughed. "I could tell you because she's going to Big Waters with me, and there's no sort of telling. Maybe those things are so, all right. But the true reason's much the same that made my dad draw a bird on the top of a triangle at the back of Mother's old Bible and hand it to you to keep until I could understand it. When Mary's my wife anything belonging to me will be hers if—I don't get through. And I surely want that so."

"Yet you figure to take her—up there with you? There's Oolinak. Why ——?"

"We don't need Oolinak."

It was Mary who had come quietly from her room. She was clad once more in her old trail clothing. And her finery was put away.

"You've been listening, Mary!" Andy accused.

"Surely."

Mary's admission came without hesitation. She laid a brown hand on Andy's shoulder and squeezed herself into the space between the two men and squatted.

"I heard you and Daddy Dan saying all the things that don't really matter—just now. It was like you both. But Daddy Dan doesn't know the things that do matter—yet. Why not start in and tell it to him right?"

"What do you mean?"

Father Dan's question was instant.

"Uncle Larry's 'strike.'"

Mary's eyes were shining with sudden excitement. And Father Dan understood.

"You know it?"

"Yes, Uncle," Andy nodded.

Father Dan turned back to the fire. And his dark eyes bored their way into the heart of it. In that supreme moment his thoughts had flown to that other red-headed creature. He wondered if he were cognizant of the thing going on in that room—if he were aware that the thing which in his fear and need he had designed was fructifying.

"It was easy," Andy said. "He made it that way. There's

a dump of the stuff back there in the wood-store. And you brought it from Silt Lake. It's ambergris, every ounce of it. There's about seventy or eighty thousand dollars worth of it in the wood-store."

Father Dan nodded.

"Ambergris. So that's it. Yes, I've heard of ambergris. But—tell me." He smiled. "Tell it straight, like Mary said."

Andy told the little story of it all in the simplest possible manner—how Mary had shown him the Bible with his father's drawing, and the open chemical formula written under it; how he had instantly recognized the formula, and, realizing the danger of its written existence, had burnt it; how Mary had shown him the old outfit, which had reduced the whole thing to simple, tangible fact. The ambergris was there, and there was nothing else. It was there looking like anything else in the world but priceless treasure—a dump of it weighing something more than a hundred-weight.

"You see, Uncle, that stuff is worth about twenty-five dollars an ounce," he finished up.

Father Dan drew a deep breath which told of an emotion his silence, his quiet, had concealed.

"Then your poor father was right," he said at last. "Those people could never have discovered his secret. It was impossible without knowledge."

"Quite."

Father Dan went on musingly.

"And he left it for them to see and handle all they pleased. Wonderful! It was clever, reckless. But that was your father."

"Yes."

Mary reached a hand out, and it clasped about one of Andy's. It squeezed gently. Andy looked up with shining eyes.

"That's why I'm after it, Uncle," he cried, in a tone. "Oh, we don't need it, Mary and me. We got all we need here, and in my bank. But Dad passed that 'strike' to me. He was set on my having it. That was his one big thought when he saw the clouds banking. And I'm after it—*we're* after it. We won't disappoint him or fail him. Will we, Mary? We'll make the winter trail that Mary's been learn-

ing for me, and hardening her dogs for. She knows it all from here to Big Waters. And we'll locate his cache and haul it down under their dirty noses. Say, Uncle, it's snowing now, good. Maybe when it's through it'll blow. Well, if it blows, Mary figures that's the time for our first getaway. It might come any moment. So—we want to be married first."

Father Dan gestured.

"But boy, boy, why not next summer, when there's light and life's good? Why the winter trail? Why now? It's just stark crazy—a notion built on those ideas when you were both foolish kids. I ——"

"It isn't, Daddy!"

It came with Mary's decision both men knew so well.

"Then why?"

"It's a cache. And Andy read that drawing to be a cave. A cave that's shaped like a V turned upside down," Mary explained, quietly. "And right above it is a big gull nursery. It's easier up there when the world's frozen. There's no big waters ready to storm all the time. You aren't scared all the time for holing your kyak. My dogs'll just take us anywhere. We can get right away when the folks don't know about it. And, anyway, they wouldn't face the winter trail unless they had to. It's best, Daddy. It surely is!"

"But there won't be a gull to mark that nursery, nor any other bird within hundreds of miles of it," Father Dan argued. "Not in winter. Then snow—say, kid, there'll likely be drifts twenty feet and more at the foot of any cliff. You been there. You should know."

"I do, Daddy," Mary agreed. "Big waters is swept almost clear by the wind that howls down out of the north. Daddy, darling, it's winter, winter all the time," she cried, giving sudden vent to a passion of pent feeling. "It's our only chance. If Andy's father cached in a cave in those walls up there, what does it matter about the birds or anything? If it's a cave, we can locate it. We got all winter—six months of it. Sure, *sure* we can! We can go with the sled where we could never go in summer with a kyak. That's what I found when I was learning it all."

The passion of the girl's argument was startling. Father

Dan listened, but remained unconvinced. To him it contained no sound reasoning at all. Andy troubled himself not one whit for reasoning. He was wholly fascinated by the girl's eager defense of her own planning.

For Mary, however, that was a moment of the keenest anxiety. She saw all her planning threatened as once before it had been.

"But why you, Mary? Why not Oolinak?" Father Dan urged, turning again to his original plea as a final desperate alternative.

Mary reached out and laid a warm hand caressingly on his arm.

"Please, please, Daddy, darling!"

Father Dan turned. He looked down into the two upturned, appealing faces.

"Oh, you two crazy kids!" he glowered down at them. "Why? Why? You, Andy, you love my little girl. You want her to be your wife. Yet you'll listen to her. You'll expose her to the dire risk of it all. The winter trail? That's the least of it. Don't you see? Those folk—Jean and Dutch! Lola! They know you're here—why you're here. They know you've the knowledge your father taunted Simon with not possessing. Do you think they'll let you get away with it? Any part of it? Think. Mary up there. Those people. They'll stand at nothing after eight years of waiting. It's their big chance, and they'll grab it with every weapon they've got. Your father got it. And—and —— Psha! I'll marry you tomorrow."

Andy's eyes were troubled, but Mary's reaction was instant. She squeezed the great arm she was still holding, and her eyes were alight with a smile of supreme content.

"And with the first blow of storm we'll start right out on our—honeymoon!" she cried joyously.

Up went Father Dan's hands in the old gesture of helplessness.

"Honeymoon!" he cried. "Honeymoon! Say!"

The loneliness of the great white world about him had fully impressed itself upon Father Dan for the first time

in his life. It seemed to him as if the very springs of his whole joy of life had suddenly dried up within him.

Mary was Andy's wife. Mary—whom he still regarded as a child, almost a babe. And he, too, had made it so. He had read the church service for them. He had duly carried out the simple ceremony with Oolinak and Jane Hesther to witness. He had sacrificed everything that they might know the happiness they desired, and he was satisfied that it should be so. But the result of his sacrifice was a little overwhelming. The world loneliness of the Arctic night of winter had driven itself into his very soul.

And now it was the moment of Mary's going. Bride and husband were about to set out on the wide, unguessed sea of life together. And what a sea! What a life! What a hazard!

Father Dan's thought inspired a queer, grim, unsmiling humor, and an agony of apprehension. But he faced the whole thing unflinchingly, just as he faced the blast of the furious storm that was raging.

He was standing just beyond his own doorway and the laden sled lay at his feet. In the rage of snow-fog he could just make out the train of out-strung dogs crouching down in the snow, and the shadowy, silent figures of Andy and Mary, in their heavy furs, going about their final preparations for their northward journey.

As he watched those movements his thoughts went to another world where it was light, and the sun was to be found even in the depths of winter. He was thinking, too, of a real church, and a great gathering of many friends, of toasting and congratulations, of the irresponsible pelting with confetti and vocal God-speeds.

Mary! The child he had once rescued and since raised—the light of his heart in his advancing years. This was her wedding, her honeymoon, and she was happy. He sighed. With all his devotion to her this was the best he had been able to do for her at the greatest of all moments in a woman's life.

He watched the ghostly figures as they moved about the sled. He said no word. Then, at last, he saw them standing together, and, even in the howling and whining of the storm,

he caught the sound of happy laughter. Then he saw them stoop down and secure their snow-shoes, and he knew it was the last act before the start.

Mary came around the tail of the sled to him. She opened her be-furred arms, and, reaching up, hugged him about the neck. She kissed him. And then she released him with an abruptness that warned of emotion. Then Andy came. And their mitted hands gripped.

"Be good to her, boy," Father Dan said, in deep tones.

"My life's just hers," Andy replied.

Then came Mary's voice, shrill in the rage of the storm as she thrust her gee-pole.

"Ho, you! Mush! Blaze! Benjie! Mush on! Gee! Haw! Mush, you!"

There was a sharp cracking as the sled broke from the grip of frost. Then, with a swift, keen hiss, but without a single added spoken farewell, the outfit vanished in the blinding swirl of a fog of snow.

Father Dan remained just where the going had left him. He was staring out into the utter blackness of the relentless storm. The wind howled about the building behind him. It smote him with its vicious fury, but he was unheeding.

Then, in the midst of his gloomy reflections, he became aware of something moving. It was sound. Nor was it of the storm.

He withdrew his gaze from the direction the sled had taken, and turned facing where the ice- and snow-bound river lay away below him. The next moment a figure appeared from seemingly nowhere—a squat, broad figure swathed in furs from head to foot. It was Oolinak. He halted and spoke in a fierce, hushed whisper.

"Us see 'em," he hissed up at the missionary from the midst of his furs. "Him mans Jean. So!" he pointed down at the river beyond the landing. "Him all wait lak all sort. Then him go lak hell mak back by Fort. Oh, yes."

"Jean? How do you know? You couldn't know in—this."

But Oolinak was quite sure.

"No man's so big lak him Jean," he said. "Us know 'em plenty. Him Jean. Maybe him mush him trail. Yes."

Father Dan made no reply. Instead he turned abruptly and pushed open his door.

"Come!" he said.

And, followed by the faithful Eskimo, he passed into the warmth and secured the door behind them.

He flung off his furs and pulled his stool up to the table. He seized paper and pen, and then turned to the dusky creature beside him. His deep-set eyes were frowning, and his face was very grim.

"You're sure?" he asked, shortly.

"Us all mans sure."

"Dogs? How many? Plenty? You got out back?"

"Heap plenty dog. Yes."

"You make quick—Fort Good Hope?"

"Us all mak 'em quick."

Father Dan bent over his paper and wrote rapidly. It was a long message—long and clearly explanatory. While he wrote the Eskimo's eyes watched and rolled with an expression there was no mistaking. Father Dan folded his communication. He drew a buckskin sack from his pocket and set the paper inside it. Then he held it for Oolinak to take.

Oolinak seized it and set it somewhere inside his furs. And Father Dan spoke in a fierce tone of urgency.

"Get your dogs—the best. Make Fort Good Hope. See Boss Sergeant Spence. Give him that brief."

"Us mak 'em quick."

"Quick? Say, Oolinak, you'll travel like you've never traveled in your life. And you'll bring Sergeant Spence back here in a week if—it kills you! It's for Missie Mary!"

"Us mak 'em. Quick lak hell!"

CHAPTER XV

THE CACHE

The little old tent, with its light sapling ridge-pole, its discolored sloping sides, was snugged close for a night which was no different from the day just passed.

It was the tent which had served Father Dan on the

winter trail for many years of his work. It was the same that had seen Mary through her apprenticeship. Even the Eskimo, Oolinak, had learned to appreciate its usefulness.

In the light of the tiny seal-oil lamp it showed patched and smoke-stained, and heavily stitched with fine-drawn rawhide. Its skirting was tattered where the melting snow had rotted it. It had withstood a hundred storms in winter, and deluging rains in the open season, and it still served. Mary and Andy were under no illusion. It was a fragment of shelter which meant almost life itself to them.

Andy was squatting nearby to the curtain doorway. It was tight laced against a cold that was more than forty below zero. Mary was beside him. They were sitting arm in arm, and Mary's fingers were resting on one of the muscular hands clasped about her man's knees.

In front of them was a tiny sheet-iron stove that was steadily radiating warmth and a measure of wood-smoke in the narrow limits of the tent. The air was heavy and warm to an extent almost incredible. But then the tent was banked almost ridge-high with drift snow, wherein the train dogs were deeply burrowed for their rest.

At the far end of the tent was a collection of fuel, and the stowed outfit. Then, side by side, like their owners, were the spread-out fur sleeping bags and loose blankets.

Honeymoon? Well, yes, for neither Andy nor Mary would have had it otherwise.

They had sat there in profound, listening silence for some time. The listening was evidenced in their eyes. Andy's pipe had gone out, and Mary was frowning with recollection. It was Whispering Lake. And the "whisper" was broadcast everywhere. It was even inside the tent, dominating the choking splutter of the little stove. To Mary it was threatening, ominous. To Andy it was a curiosity that intrigued him.

As they sat there the sound of it rose and fell on the still, windless air. There were moments when it rose as though at any moment it were about to burst into a deafening roar. It was at such times that Mary nerved herself for the climax. Then there were easier moments—moments when the "whisper" was like the murmur of a thousand voices talking in

some foreign tongue, talking in low, hushed, eager tones. Rise or fall, loud or low, it went on and on endlessly, weirdly, harmlessly. And of the two hearkening to it only Mary realized that into which it could develop.

"You know, Andy, dear, I bullied poor Oolinak 'lak all sort,'" Mary said, abruptly, with a little laugh, borrowing from the Eskimo's queer phraseology. "He *was* scared. My! he was scared! 'Devil-devil!' It was all he could think of. And I'd say his poor teeth were chattering with something that wasn't the cold. If I'd have let him, he'd have headed the dogs and mushed right back for the Mission. Oolinak! Think! Oolinak in such fear that he wanted to run—run! And never stop. I was angry, but I wanted to laugh. That was before I knew."

Andy had been observing the restless movements of Mary's fingers while she was talking. Now he released his knees and possessed himself of her hand. He held it prisoned in a firm, warm clasp.

"Tell me what you knew, little kid."

Mary gazed at the reddening sides of the stove. Then, of a sudden, she reached forward with her disengaged hand and shut home the tiny damper.

"Undo the curtain and roll it back. I'll show you," she said, quietly.

Andy released her hand. He knelt over toward the laced doorway and began to unfasten it. He glanced around.

"Best set your furs on," he said. "Pass me mine."

Then, a few moments later, two fur-clad figures were standing outside in a world of snow, and in a night light that was nearly equal in brilliance to a sunlit day.

The whole of the northern heavens was a blazing arc of spear-pointed, golden aurora. It began on the far western horizon and terminated only where the eastern skyline cut it off. Pale, in contrast, were the myriads of stars which sparkled in a soft velvet setting, like a world of jewels flung broadcast. The cold was bitter, but the night air was still, utterly still. No cloud anywhere marred the perfect beauty of the scene.

They were gazing out from under the lee of the only shelter in a wide, open flat. It was a bold sentry of rock

rising sheer, and without any apparent reason for its existence, out of a plain so flat that no imagination could conceive of the earth being round. It marked the inlet of Flood River to the wide, solidly frozen expanse of Whispering Lake.

Mary pointed. She pointed out over the limitless level of the snow-bound lake. The direction was northward, and her arm swung right across from east to west.

"It was there, Andy. Right across," she said, in a tone not untouched by awe. "We'd just made right here, at the edge of the lake. We were making this hummock for camp after leaving the trail out there. It was whispering. Whispering right along. Then, without warning, there came a crash like all the thunder in the world gathered in one place right here. And when I got my wits, and looked back where we'd come, I saw a range of ice mountains grow right up out of the flat. And it seemed to bank hundreds of feet high. Then, almost at once, they sank out of sight, and all the world was flat again and half hidden under a mist that hadn't been there before." She laughed, a little uncertainly. "You know, I think I felt Oolinak's 'devil-devil' was not so far away just then. The whole world seemed to be rocking with his anger, or laughter, or—or maybe his disappointment."

"And the 'whisper'?"

Andy's arm was about the girl's shoulders as though to protect.

"It just went right on. Oh, yes, the 'devil-devil' went right on talking and muttering—like he is now. I think he's a bad 'devil-devil' and meant it all for us. But our luck fooled him."

Mary's laugh was intended to rob her story of its significance. But Andy was not deceived. Mary was afraid of the thing she had witnessed.

"We'll get right back inside," he said.

They were sitting again, side by side, before their friendly little stove. The tent flap was re-laced, and their furs were flung aside again. Andy was running an oil rag through the snub-barrel of a big automatic. Mary was watching him as though his every movement held her profoundest interest.

After awhile she glanced up at the laced flap. And the slant of her big eyes had expectancy in them. It was the loudening of the "whisper." Then she sighed relief as it died to its more gentle murmur.

"What d'you make of it all?" she asked, as though ashamed of her question.

Andy continued his work without looking up.

" 'Devil-devil'," he said, inconsequently.

Mary studied the freckled cheek and the flaming head for some moments. Then she made a little movement of the hands.

"You know, I've got a hunch the lake's an old volcano crater that's been flooded," she said. "Daddy Dan always says the country's alive with dead craters," she laughed. "He's seen the fires of Unaga. They're ter'ble, he says. A great mountain of fire that's—that's always burning."

Andy shook his head.

"Maybe," he said. "But I don't think so."

"Then what?"

Andy looked up. And his eyes were grinning his old mischief.

"I didn't see those ice mountains," he said, slily.

Mary's flicker of a smile answered him. That was all. She instantly changed the subject.

"I never thought of a gun when I packed the trail with Oolinak. It's queer. I should have. You got that down East?"

Andy gave the gun a final wipe and considered it thoughtfully.

"It's the old dad's," he said, after awhile. Then he looked around into Mary's eyes which were so ready to meet his. "Uncle Dan handed it to me. He's a great feller. Seems like he's too big for a world like this. He handed you to me without a kick. And doing that he let go the only thing he cared for in the world. Do you know what he said when he took this gun out from its place in his trunk and handed it to me? He said, 'It's not my work helping folks to go a-killing. But my Christianity never could see sense in providing spare cheeks for the other feller to smite. There've been many times in my life I've yearned to kill. And I'm not ashamed. If anything threatened hurt to Mary I'd surely

want to kill. And kill good. Here, take this. And you'll know when to use it.' "

Mary drew a deep breath.

"And you would use it, Andy, dear?"

"On sight!"

Mary saw the big jaws snap shut. Her eyes shone.

"I—I believe you would!" Then emotion passed and she rippled the little laugh Andy so loved to hear. "It's all so queer, Andy, dear," she cried. "I mean when you come to think of things. I can't remember a time when I haven't wanted to laugh at you, and—and say things. And there hasn't been a time when you didn't act that way to me. Yet the more I said and did to make you mad, and the madder you made me, the more I loved your fool red head. Then I used to dream all the foolish things we'd make out together. The trail! 'Strikes!' Anywhere! Everywhere! And—and that's just what's happening now. Isn't it crazy? Folks in books reckon if you concentrate, and will hard, things'll happen your way. Maybe that's it. I—I willed all my life for you and me to pack the trail together like we are now. I willed it so I couldn't think anything else."

"Why?"

Mary laughed, teasingly.

"Oh, because, maybe, I was foolish."

Andy grinned.

"Sure it was, kid."

Mary's joy was utterly complete.

"Oh, Andy," she cried, happily. "I—I think you'll be a gunman like Dutch, or a big savage like Jean. And I'm not going to sit around liking your freckles any more. I'll go to my blankets and sleep. A wife can't make love to a husband when he tells her she's foolish."

Andy only gazed and grinned at the dancing light of supreme happiness in the girl's glorious eyes. But when she made a move to carry out her threat he reached out a huge hand and caught her by the loose buckskin of her parka and hauled her back to her place beside him. She offered not the least resistance.

"You'll sit right there, little kid, and stay put," he chortled. "Your days of independence are done, finished,

over. Get right on to the fact you're 'way out in 'devil-devil's' territory, where things happen. Now tell me. What do we hit up against after this—'devil-devil'? I want it all. I'd sooner hear you talk than snore."

The story of the trail through the frozen marshland world lying ahead of them, which Mary told to Andy as they basked in the comforting warmth of their little stove on the shore of Whispering Lake, afforded the man no more than a bare outline of the reality awaiting them. Mary had faced that trail in winter ten times on five double journeys. She had encountered what she believed to be every inclemency of weather it could show her, and none of it had disturbed her, or robbed her of her confidence. It was left to this long last trail, for which she had so carefully prepared, to drive her to the edge of things where nerve is on the verge of breaking.

They left the barren flat of Whispering Lake under conditions which added uplift even to hearts already at the peak of human happiness. There was not a breath of wind to hint at possibilities. There was no cloud to obscure the amazing lights which transformed the night of winter into brilliant day. Even the threatening "whisper" of the "devil-devil" was tuned down to a pitch so soft as to be almost silent. Yet, in a brief twenty-four hours, it was all changed, and they were fighting desperately for life, and, perhaps, even reason.

It was right after the sturdy Benjie, with his unfailing instinct for direction, had carried them clear of the deep canyon of the northern continuation of the river that the storm broke. The lofty, snow-clad walls of the gorge had been left far behind. They had long since become merged into the general level of a vague and distant sky-line. The blaze of aurora had been blotted out, and not a star looked down at them. The wind came. It came in patchy rushes. And, in something to be counted in minutes, they were thrashed and driven, blinded and buffeted, as though every fury of the northern world were in league to bar their further progress.

They were blinded to direction. They were blinded almost

to the wretched, striving creatures hauling their sled. They could do little more than cling to the sled tail, and mush in voices that scarcely carried beyond their furs. They just groped. It was that moment without hope when human mentality no longer serves for more than to govern struggling limbs, and only the savage instinct of the wild may save. By the mercy of Providence the latter was theirs. It was there in the staunch heart of Benjie.

There was but one thought between Mary and Andy in the burden of that heart-break struggle. Camp! Camp, how and when they might! Rest from the freezing, cruel wind that seemed to strike from every direction at once! Shelter for eyes blinded and aching with the fury of snow-fog driving into them! But it looked utterly beyond all hope in a region where Mary had no recollection of a tree, or hill, or even a low cut-bank. They must go on and on till human endurance reached its despairing limits.

In those moments Benjie was forgotten. It seemed impossible that the old dog could count. All concern, both in the man and the girl, was to mush on. Whither? But it was neither Andy's nor Mary's frantic shoutings that kept the straining team facing into the storm. It was the great old loose lead. It was Benjie. He savaged the weary, dispirited creatures of lesser heart, and herded them forward much as a sheep-dog herds his flock, but with infinitely more ruthless savagery. He never once desisted, nor gave them rest till he had headed them into a low, rocky shelter where drift snow had piled mountainously.

Then it was that Mary realized the opportunity with which her faithful savage had provided her. Under the lee of that lone, sheltering hummock they contrived the camp for which their souls had yearned. It was just sufficient shelter for them to raise their tent. For three weary days, dogs, sled, and tent lay almost buried under a warmth-giving covering of drifted snow.

When, at last, the end came, it was as though the combined legions of northern elemental devils had completely spent themselves in the violence of their onslaught. On the third day the wind definitely veered out of the north and

the temperature rose, and by the time the fourth had begun there was not a breath stirring that could have drifted a snowflake.

The northern lights rose like a world-wide sun. The stars laughed down, winking their gleaming eyes merrily, and the perfect calm of it, bitterly cold but infinitely heartening, went right on till the desolate marsh barrens were only a memory, and the great-hearted Benjie triumphantly herded his team into the gaping jaws of the inner cove of Big Waters.

The dazzling reflection of the aurora which now filled more than half the heavenly dome lit the wide extent of the inner cove with an intensity almost blinding. Mary and Andy had made a brief camp to ease and feed their dogs, and to consider the final direction on which might depend the early result of their labors.

It was a camp in the open—a small, carefully spared fire, and food—no more. They sat on their outfit close up against a granite wall, where the snow had been blown almost clear, and an abutment of upstanding cliff further sheltered against the bite in the cold that drifted down out of the north.

"It looks like we need a bright decision, kid," Andy said, his eyes narrowed against the snowy dazzle of the white plain spreading out for miles in every direction. "Can you hand us one? Cove?" He laughed, quietly. "When you talked 'cove' to me, I guess I was thinking with a college brain. This—this is a sea, and a mighty good-sized one. It would take a year to hunt it clear through."

Mary was eating her food with the appreciation of keen appetite, nor did she look up with her usual readiness.

"It's this shore we're on now," she said, confidently. "My summer trip told me that. Your father made here only in the open season. I had to see it the way he did to pass it on to you. The tide sets right around those far cliffs eastward, and no canoe could live in the big waters it makes. The water here's dead flat. And the wash of things floating would bring them this way. There's his old working this

side. There're caves, too, for a cache. I'd say that working's our home camp."

"Ye-es."

Andy was frowning down at the wisp of smoke rising from their smolder of fire. He laid his empty pannikin aside, drew off his heavy mitts and filled his pipe. He lit it with a hot cinder and blew smoke heavily.

"You know, kid, it's a kind of everlasting wonder to me the way you just know things. That's not to be funny, or—or superior. It's just sheer truth. Now I've been thinking hard, ever since you gave me your story, to get the size of things, the—the right hunch for us to work on. And I've only just got it. You know it right away without a worry. That old working!"

Mary was drinking the last of her tea from her tin beaker. Now she smiled over the rim of it at the preoccupied face of Andy.

"I had to think against the time you came back to me and needed to know," she said, as she laid her beaker aside.

Andy sighed, contentedly. In that moment he felt that no words of his could adequately express his feelings. He smoked heavily and nodded.

"You know, little kid, I've argued and argued. And maybe when I tell you you'll want to laugh at the result. It's this. The old dad could take all sorts of a chance, but he was wise—mighty wise. That message he left me—did you see anything queer to it? No, I don't mean the secret of it, but the manner—the whole thing. He was leaving a message to me he wanted me to read easy. He figured I shouldn't be able to mistake. See? He didn't want me guessing my red head gray. At least, that's how I figure. I don't figure there's any sort of real cache at all. He just relied on the formula to put me wise. I think the stuff's just dumped where he made camp, without attempt to hide it up. And it's inside some cave that had a V-shaped opening that anyone could locate—even Simon and his gunmen. We got to locate his camp. And it won't be a mile from that old working he made to fool those darn crooks with. Does that sound sense to you, little kid?"

Mary sat silent for some moments, and Andy watched the

glorious eyes searching the mean heart of the little fire. Suddenly, she brought her hands together in an eager gesture. She turned. A wide smile looked into the freckled face.

"Oh, Andy," she cried. "I know! At least I think I do! Sure it's that old working. I remember. It's way up on the shore above tide level. And right back of it there's a big cave with a high opening. It's—it's like that V upside down. It's a big opening you wouldn't reckon to be a cave. It's—it's like a split in the cliffs. And I remember there were millions of birds about the rocks above it. I looked in. It's a cave all right. And I saw wood-ashes—a great heap. It was a camp for—for someone!"

"You mean it might have been where Simon's folks camped?"

"It might have been."

"My, it's a pity you didn't search it."

But Mary made no reply. Instead, she reached a hand out and it came to rest on one of Andy's.

"This means so much, Andy, boy. It's so big—I mean to us," she said. "I'd hate to death making a fool reckoning and putting you wrong. But that ash dump *was* big! It had taken years to accumulate, I'd say. Your father came here years. Those others just came—and went. If we're right, boy, maybe the cache, the dump of it's, right in that cave just hidden enough so Simon's folks shouldn't steal it to make fire with. I wonder. Millions! I'm just crazy to make that old working and hunt, smell it out, till there's no place else to look. Oh, Andy! Think! Millions of it! And it's all—yours!"

"Not yet, kid."

Andy gazed up at the ever-changing, ever-moving heavenly lights, and he shook his head at them.

"We've come through this far with our luck holding," he went on, seriously. "I've a hunch no one, not even you and me, can ever set millions into their pouch without a worry. But we won't start collecting any more hunches for awhile. Say, kid, you keep me wondering. Those dandy eyes of yours locating things, and that busy mind keeping tab of them. But it was mostly that way when we were kids, wasn't it?

It was always your wits that saw us through most any old thing. And they're going to in this."

Mary's smile lingered on the serious, freckled face and the man's hunched body. It was infinitely tender and something maternal.

"Oh, Andy," she said, chuckling softly, "don't talk that way, or I'll—I'll be worried to death you won't want to beat me over the head with a stone club when I act foolish."

Mary leaped to her feet with a ripple of happy laughter and started to break camp.

The sled, with its load of outfit, was drawn up below the old working, with its topping of decaying haulage gear, and its flattened dump of tailings. The whole thing was under feet of hard, frozen snow. Only the stanchions of the primitive winch stood up clear of it.

The dogs, with their bellies full, had burrowed deep into the drift snow for their long, overdue rest. Their empty tugs were strung out where Mary had released them. The girl herself had made no attempt to unpack the oufit yet. It remained lashed on the sled and she was seated on it.

Mary was alone. It had been her own choice. She had sent Andy off at once to explore the great cavern which they hoped, years ago, had been his father's shelter, while she cared for and kept watch over her dogs.

The girl was gazing out across the flat of rough ice buried under feet of snow. She was gazing far and seeing only those images which her busy mind conjured. The blaze of aurora meant nothing to her just then. The still frozen waters she had navigated with the faithful Oolinak were forgotten. The drear desolation of silent inhospitality, of grim threat, was for the time being utterly outside her ken.

Her every thought was for the man somewhere there behind her, searching, searching, and an infinite joy was hers. She had deliberately refused to accompany him, so that, if the treasure they sought was to be found, his alone should be the delight of it. She wanted nothing in the world for herself but Andy. She wanted only his deep, abiding love. The rest? The rest of everything the world might hold

for them was for him. Mary had lived for eight years for all this. She was blissfully content.

Andy's absence was prolonged. After awhile the still cold began to drive in under the girl's enveloping furs and her stout moccasins. She stood up and beat her mittened hands. Then she began to pace the shore.

Once she paused and gazed up at the grim granite walls as though seeking the gull nursery which should have been above. It was grayly overshadowing and swept clear of snow, and she saw that the conical entrance to the cavern went far up, almost to the actual summit of the cliff. She stood there considering it. She was just waiting, waiting.

Then it came—the loud, urgent voice of Andy. It was summoning her. She set off at best speed she could make, and as she went her eyes were lit by all the old impish delight of her childhood.

Andy was just within the entrance to the cavern when Mary rounded the great thrust that reached far down the bowlder-littered shore, and concealed the opening from view of the sled. He was standing there, so big and eager as she came, that the sight of him set a queer tugging somewhere deep in the region of her heart. His blue eyes were alight. His freckled face was grinning. And he called to her, in his impatience to impart his great news.

"You're right, little kid," he cried. "You always are," he added, with a prodigal generosity to which Mary knew she was unentitled. "The stuff's there, right inside, away back—lumps of it! He never cached it. It's just a storehouse, same as if it were driftwood. Say, this is a swell treasurehouse! It goes away in. And there's light from the aurora pours right in down a rift that splits it from top to bottom. Come right in and I'll show you."

"Oh, Andy!"

It was a little cry—a queer little cry with a catch in it that was almost a sob of joy. If Andy understood he gave no sign. He just grabbed an arm, and Mary submitted to being hauled without consideration into the twilight of the shadowed chamber.

It was far within, and the journey to it was a clambering struggle over rocks that littered the whole of the inner

floor. They were ascending too, always ascending. Once past the lofty entrance chamber, as a cavern the place terminated and became a wide rift open to the heavenly lights, with drift snow piling hugely among tumbled rocks.

Mary climbed with an agility that kept full pace with the eager Andy, but while he barged over every obstruction she found a way of greater ease and held to it. And so they came to the wide ledge which was a huge projection from the sheer wall.

The ledge was no more than waist-high to them. It had no pretense of a hiding. Snow had fallen from the rift above, and the litter of ambergris piled there was partly covered by it.

Andy was still gripping Mary's arm as they stood over that low shelf. He was gazing down on the treasure spread out. For some moments, no word passed between them. Then, at last, it was Mary who voiced the thought common to them both.

"But your father always said there were—millions!" she protested.

Andy cleared his throat.

"Yes."

Andy released his hold on the girl's arm and stepped up on to the ledge. He searched its length. Then he came back and stood beside the girl again.

"There's not more than we can haul in one trip," he said, in a tone.

"It doesn't look more than was lying back in Jane Hesther's wood-store."

"No. I'd say two hundreds at most."

Again silence fell while the meager pile was considered.

Suddenly Andy laughed. It lacked his ready mirth, his humor. At the sound of it, Mary was aware of a spasm of feeling such as in all her young life she had never before known. Mary's life had rarely enough known tears, but the sound of Andy's laugh brought them very near.

"There's been a lot more of it, though," Andy said. "I found chips of it all over the ledge."

Mary stifled her feelings.

"Jean warned me we'd find—nothing!" she said.

"You never said. When?"

"Nearly two years back. He tried to make me marry him."

"Jean? The rotten fish!"

Even at that intense moment Mary was able to smile at the sound of Andy's fierce explosion.

"But how could they get wise?" Andy argued. "Those toughs wouldn't know ambergris from sow-belly or any other old truck. I guess they haven't even heard the name unless —unless —— Say, that's an idea, kid," he cried, with sudden urgency. "Pienart! Jan Pienart! He knows. And—he's at Leaping Horse. It's a chance. I—I wonder."

He stood there in the queer, soft light, gazing down into Mary's up-turned face. He was thinking, sorting his new idea in the midst of the bitterness of disappointment. Mary remained silent. She wanted to say so much. To comfort him. But no word came from her. She just looked and looked. And a feeling of heart-break was in her.

The silence between them prolonged. And then, of a sudden, it was broken. It was the savage snarl of a dog. And it came from the far distance. Somewhere there back at the mouth of the cavern. It came again and more fiercely. Andy started.

"The dogs!" he cried. "They're starting a scrap. I'd forgotten 'em. Wait here, kid. I'll go fix them."

He was gone without waiting for reply. He was gone before Mary could claim her right. The girl was of a mind to follow. The dogs would obey her word. Andy would need to use force—maybe a club. But she remained where she was—Andy had told her to wait. She seated herself on the edge of the ledge where the ambergris was stored, facing down toward the mouth of the cavern.

But the far opening was hidden around a thrust of rock. Anyway, she was not concerned. She was thinking hard, and feeling was a-riot. All her thought was of the man who had just left her, and the disappointment he had endured. With the greatest difficulty she stifled her inclination to tears.

After awhile she was able to think more calmly, and instantly she realized that Andy's absence had prolonged.

It seemed to her he had had time to club the whole team and to have got back again. But ——

She listened. There was no sound of fighting. There was no canine protest at punishment—no sound at all, in fact. Then, all in a moment, she stood up from the ledge. Yes, there was a sound. It was Andy coming back. She could hear the pad of his moccasins as he made his way over the rocks. She forthwith set out to meet him.

Mary reached the thrust of rocks and called.

"Ho, you, Andy, boy! I'm coming right along and we'll fix camp. You stop right there. I ——"

She had rounded the rocky abutment and the mouth of the cave, in its lofty triangle, came into view. But the words died out. They were literally choked in her throat. She was seized in the grip of powerful hands, and she felt the hideous pressure of two thumbs on her windpipe, even through the thick fur of her storm collar. In the half light she realized a great figure towering over her, and a pair of pale, white-ringed eyes gazing blankly into hers.

CHAPTER XVI

THE HOLD-UP

Just what happened to her after those huge hands closed about her throat, and the stifling pressure of vicious thumbs completed their work of suffocation, Mary never knew. Perhaps she fainted under the stress. Perhaps it was a near approach to actual death. Whatever it was, in the midst of her struggles, which were as violent as she could make them, the world suddenly blotted out completely. She knew nothing more. And with the rest went the baleful stare of Jean Duchette's hateful eyes.

Then, just as suddenly, Mary awoke. She awoke to a sensation of hurt and dreadful weakness. And she felt herself sagging heavily. Something that was carrying the whole weight of her body was cruelly cutting into her flesh. She was dazed. She was not quite sure of anything. All that seemed almost real was her pain, and a blaze of reflected

light on the snow, which she vaguely understood must be the wide expanse of the frozen cove.

But her daze was only momentary. Suddenly, thick and fast, the reality of everything tumbled in upon her.

First came the understanding that she was bound fast, hand and foot. There was no doubt of that. Her hands were secured behind her back, bound to something hard, and cold, and upright, and there was the pain of tight bonds about her ankles. Then she knew she was at the edge of the old working, and that she must have been bound to a stanchion of the decaying haulage gear set over it. But even as these things came to her she shrank before the nightmare figure of Jean Duchette, bulking hugely in his fur parka. He was standing over her, and his cold eyes were staring into her face unblinkingly.

In that moment Mary's limbs braced and took up their natural burden. Instantly she knew relief from the cutting of the rawhide rope which had held her erect against the stanchion.

It was the hateful sight of Jean that stiffened her, and she turned her gaze away to avoid him. As she did so she discovered the others. It was Dutch Deazel standing over the prostrate body of Andy. They were away over just beyond the mouth of the treasure cave. She drew a sharp breath as she saw that the Swede's gun was threatening.

A feeling of dreadful despair swamped Mary in that moment as she realized the full measure of the disaster that had befallen them. Her blood ran cold, ice cold, and she knew real fear for perhaps the first time in her young life. It was not for herself. It was for the bound and helpless red-headed creature who was her all. Andy was lying there, capless, and with his freckled face pressed into the snow. And the whole world was freezing under a temperature of more than sixty below zero. Suddenly she shrilled across at the man with the gun.

"Sit him up!" she cried, frantically. "Get his face out of that snow! Pass him his cap, you rotten Swede gunman!"

Mary had no thought for what she was doing, and scarcely of what she was saying. She had no care. No fear of consequences. She was just beside herself with concern

for Andy. And perhaps it was the reckless femininity of it that achieved for her.

Dutch stooped at once as though in obedience. She saw him grab Andy by the shoulders and roll him over. Then he sat him up, set his fur cap in place over his shock of hair, and pulled it down till it covered his freezing ears. Mary discovered that Andy was bound like a mummy. He was bound from his shoulders right down to his ankles.

She drew a sharp breath as Dutch turned to her. Now his gun was again in his hand.

"So you've woke up, my gal, eh?" he cried, with fierce irony. "Wal, I'm glad. I guess we ken surely start that band right in to play."

Then he looked down at Andy and beheld the fury in the man's blue eyes as he became aware of the thing that had been done to Mary. He laughed in his snarling way and indicated the girl with the muzzle of his pointing gun.

"Guess you didn't figger on that, my blue-eyed boy, eh? You hadn't a notion your swell dame would need to go through it, too? That so? Didn't look to see her hangin' right over that hole your Pop fixed to fool us folks with? Well, you know now. She's right there. An' she's stoppin' jest wher' she is till me an' Jean are through with her. I guess it won't take long. A haf hour with the cold more than sixty below."

He gazed appraisingly up at the aurora-lit sky, and then out over the white field of the frozen cove's immensity. Then he again addressed himself to the raging Andy, and kept to his taunting, hectoring manner.

"Now you're goin' to talk," he said. "An' make no mistake about it. You're jest goin' to hand me out that knowledge you bin away collectin'. See? You're jest goin' to tell me what you know about the stuff your Pop hauled out of here. And jest wher' he's got that dump o' millions cached. You're goin' to spit it all up. An' quick. That's your big hope. If you don't, why jest kep your eyes on your swell dame an' watch—Jean. You'll sure laff your red head off. They reckon it's dead easy freezin' to death. I don't know. But it'll be as amusin' as a circus fer us, when Jean strips that lovesome dame stark. I guess it won't come amiss fer

you to see your—woman—without a rag o' stuff to hide up the dandy shape of her elegant body, eh? Now talk."

Mary heard every word of the sentence the brute was passing on her as Dutch intended that she should. But its outward effect upon her was nothing of what might have been looked for. She gave no sign that she realized the horror of the thing they meant to do, or that it disturbed her in the least. Yet she was fully alive to its meaning. She knew it was no bluff. She was far too acute to be fooled into any false estimate of this man and his brutish helper. She just smiled across at Andy whose freckled cheeks were aflame with fury as he hurled defiance in retort.

"You lousy Dago," he snarled up at the leering face. "You and that rotten dead fish of yours'll get nothing out of me. Not a thing. You'll never handle those millions Father left cached here for any old bluff of that sort. You can pull your long suit, and it'll get you nowhere—except the penitentiary. You don't know. And I'll see you don't ever know. Get your back teeth into that and worry it."

They were brave enough words but Andy realized their weakness even as he flung them in his fury. He was bound and helpless. And Mary? But at that moment Mary loyally flung in her chorus.

"Swell place—penitentiary, Dutch," she jeered, with her little laugh.

It fell flat. The face of the unmoving Jean remained as blank as though he had not heard. And Dutch simply gazed down upon his victim in ominous silence. Finally, however, Dutch's voice broke harshly. He swung around on the waiting Jean and pointed.

"Rip off'n her parka," he snarled. "Maybe it'll quiet a sassy tongue. Penitentiary, eh?"

The rage in Andy's eyes merged into stark horror as he beheld the swiftest thing in the way of movement he had ever known the heavy Jean to accomplish. He saw him step up to the prisoned Mary. He saw his great hands reach toward her. He was witness to a wholly impotent struggle which lasted only seconds. Then he saw Jean move back. He was carrying Mary's fur parka. Mary was still bound as she had been before. But now she was left with no protection

but her buckskin trail clothing against the driving cold of sixty below zero.

Andy was aware of Dutch's gloating.

"The band's started to play," he cried. "You're goin' to see them things I sed. All of 'em. Oh, yes. You're goin' to get a sight that'll set Jean's eyes glad, anyway. A swell, white, soft body all pretty-pretty. All of it. Get me? All of it. You surely are."

The foulness of the man's leer was the last thing in beastliness. They would strip Mary, his Mary, bare to her pure white flesh. And they would let her freeze to death while they tortured her with the horror of her nakedness before their common gaze. Andy's head swam. His Mary. He gazed across at her. And he saw that she was actually smiling. That she was nodding her head at him in staunch encouragement.

Dutch, too, was looking at the girl. He, too, saw her brave little smile. Furthermore, he read the determination in her encouragement. He signed to Jean.

"Now them buckskins," he snarled. "Get 'em right off'n her. Ef you can't strip her pants easy use your knife. She won't need 'em again—ever. She don't get away with any of it."

Jean moved to obey. Andy saw him leap to his task. He saw those reaching hands. In a moment they would contact with the girl's soft, white flesh. Blood rushed to his head. And he cried aloud his yielding at the gunman.

"Stop that hell's bastard, and I squeal!" he cried, in a frenzy. "Set her furs back! I'll tell you all you need! If that devil's spawn strips her further you'll get nothing! Set her furs back, and I'll tell you! Not before!"

Dutch grinned. He nodded across at Jean. Then, while the business of restoring Mary's garment was completed, his grin passed. He turned on Andy and pointed his words with his gun.

"I know her, and I know you," he snarled. "I'm takin' no chances. Try to stack the deck an' sure as hell your dame freezes stiff, jest percisely as I said. That goes. Now come clean."

But Andy remained silent. He was gazing across at Mary,

now wrapped once more in the warmth-giving folds of her parka. The girl was no longer smiling encouragement. Her big eyes were full of reproach!

"Spiel!"

Dutch snapped his command, and Andy looked up at him. At that moment the sight of the Swede's face was preferable to Mary's reproach.

"It's ambergris!"

"Ambergris? What the hell ——?"

"For God's sake, am I talking to a half-wit? Are you just a murdering tough without the brain of a human? It's ambergris. And there's junks of it lying right under your fool eyes inside this cave here. It's been lying there eight years for you to look at, and handle, and collect, and trade. You've handled the same stuff all the time when you've been chasin' my father's outfit. You've seen it, and known it all the time. You, and Simon, and the others. Maybe you've even burnt up thousands of dollars of it in your camp-fires. You poor, rotten shyster! It's there. Go get it. All you want. There's enough in that cave to load your sled down. And it'll trade you twenty-five dollars to the—ounce. Now cut that poor darn kid free."

Dutch shook his head, his narrowed eyes scowling.

"You're travelin' too quick," he said. For some moments he searched the freckled, frowning face in silence. Then he went on: "You can cut the shyster talk," he said, snarling. "That won't set that 'pore darn kid free.' Ef you need to have your dame without ice you'll stick to am—ambergris. You'll talk ambergris all you know. You can talk fer—her life. An' when you've told me, and shown me, it's you an' your dame's fer a free pass—without gun. Now you talk, an' talk plenty, an'—civil."

There was no help for it but to comply. Andy restrained the hot fury that was driving him to insult. He stuck to ambergris, and told it as he had told it before, but without humorous embellishment.

Then, at last, when he had finished the telling, Dutch freed his legs while he doubly secured his arms and hands behind his back. Dutch watched him while he stood up

stiffly and stamped his feet to restore circulation. Then he turned to Jean.

"You'll hold that dame, boy, till I'm through with this," he said. "If this guy coughs up the goods, he can get his woman—if you're through with her. If he don't ——!"

He broke off and turned to Andy. He came up to him and thrust his grinning face near up to the freckles.

"Now, you bum red-head. This ambergris. And don't forget. My gun's right back of your guts. Show me!"

Mary had seen them go. Andy led the way into the mouth of the cave. And Dutch was behind him, ready, on the instant, to deal with any attempt at trickery. And as they passed behind the great abutment of rock she sighed as though her last hope had gone.

The spirit of the girl was invincible. She realized to the full the terrible thing with which she had been threatened, perhaps with which she was still threatened, yet she deplored Andy's yielding as though there had been no sort of necessity for it, as though the alternative were a matter of no concern whatever. The defeat of the whole thing was the thing that mattered.

Without a thought for herself and the bonds which held her, she looked at the great, loutish figure of Jean and searched her nimble mind for something which might hurt him. She felt it was all she could do. And above all things in the world now she wanted to hurt him.

"Say, you poor dead fish," she jeered at him, "I'm kind of wondering just how many thousands of dollars your fool-wit partners have burnt up in making camp when you were chasing things. My! They guessed he was toting driftwood in his outfit. And—and it was ambergris! The most precious thing in the world! Did they steal his driftwood to make camp? Did they? Sure they did, if I know your toughs. Think of thousands of dollars burning right there before their eyes. Say, that would worry me all my life. The thought of it. You know you aren't a bit bright, Jean. You told me it was all cleared out, hauled, when you tried to bluff me into marrying you. It's—still there. Well, you're getting it, aren't you? I wonder if it's millions. It didn't look that

way to me. Won't Lola be mad if it's not? It's the sort of fool thing that would happen with you sitting in at the game. You're not lucky, are you, Jean? But how could you be? You always were a poor fish, a poor dead fish. You ——"

"A poor dead fish, eh?"

It came with a snarl, with bared teeth and a lifted lip. For the first time in her life Mary realized real life in the man's pale eyes, in the sudden pressure of blood pulsing in the distended veins on his forehead.

Jean moved. He came close to her and Mary realized the clawlike hooking of his fingers as his hands were raised as though to seize her throat. She was startled. But she was still smiling with all the old derision she knew would madden the man.

"That's your play an' it's through, you miser'ble slut," Jean growled at her through his bared teeth. "Now it's my play. You guessed you were gettin' away with it, since that red-head son of a bitch squealed. You're not. You'll freeze just as Dutch said. You'll freeze fer my pleasure. Dead fish, eh? Well, I guess you'll be dead mutton."

His hands reached at the cords holding Mary's hands to the stanchion behind her.

And then she knew. Then she realized the thing she had brought about. She shut her eyes to hide the man's fury-distorted face from her sight. She flung back her fair head so that it struck hard against the old stanchion behind her. And she screamed with all the power of her lungs. It was not fear, yet fear was shivering through her senses. It was an inspiration of her nimble wits.

She cried out to Andy, to Dutch, for succor. She cried out as though in the extremity of terror. Then came the shrill cry as she called on Benjie—the dog that hated Jean —on Blaze, and on all her team she knew to be curled up asleep in the drifted snow nearby to her sled. And out of the corner of her eye she saw a sudden surging of the snow.

It heaved. Then, from under its broken, white surface she saw a black and gray pack leap toward her while the man flung loose the bonds securing her hands.

The six great wolfish creatures came with a rush, and the

man saw them. In an instant his hands were withdrawn and one dived for the gun in the depths of the pocket in his parka. But he was late by seconds. Benjie, even in his mistress's succor, was on the lead. He leaped, a hundred and thirty pounds of ferocity. He leaped with a wolfish joy, snarling furiously, and Jean went down under the impact without reaching his defensive gun. In a moment the whole pack was on him, tearing and rending. And Benjie was tearing and rending more savagely than all the rest.

It was over in moments. Mary gazed horrified, terrified at the terrible thing she had invoked. The ghastliness of it! Sickened, half dazed, she was aware of shouts reaching her from the mouth of the cavern. And at the same moment she was aware of the great Benjie crouching somewhere about Jean's head, lifting his wolfish muzzle and licking the great jaws that were dripping with human blood.

Mary struggled with all her strength. The man had released her arms, ready, as he had promised, to strip her of her garments. Now she tore at the lashings about her body. In a few moments she had cleared them, and had bent down to release her feet.

Stiff, sore, and almost faint, she staggered in the wild efforts she made. But at last the knots yielded, and she was free. Then she shrilled at her dogs. She herded them from the body which, in their half wolf instincts, they were ready to strip to the bone. All except Benjie she drove off. And Benjie crouched down snarling over the rush of blood streaming from the throat he had literally torn out.

She stood there gazing down on the awful destruction the great beast had wrought. She looked at the dead white face and the stare of the white-ringed eyes. And, gazing thus, her terror of the thing she beheld died out of her. She just looked, that was all.

"Well, say, that feller's sure a whale!"

It was Dutch. And he was grinning as though that which he was gazing down at was something that pleased him mightily. He was watching Benjie from a few yards away. And he was standing with Andy, who was still with his arms and hands well secured behind his back.

The gunman turned his grinning eyes on Mary, who was regarding her faithful dog.

"Say, gal, your dog has saved me a killing. He certainly has! You see, ther' ain't 'nuff o' that darn ambergris to share out with that stiff, or his precious Maw. Y'see this has made a swell clean job of it fer me. I cleaned up the dope, an' the only killin's been done through you folks. That's bully. It'll set a seal on any yarn you feel like handin' broadcast. No, you won't talk—now. Not if you're wise, not if you're wise!"

He shook his head. And he glanced swiftly from one to the other.

"You two kids have surely put over a proposition that suits me. I promised you a free pass out—without your gun. It's yours. I got the stuff," he grinned. "An' ther' ain't no malice to me. There's your dogs an' your outfit. Fix 'em, an' beat it. Beat it, an' don't stop around to admire the scenery. Beat it like hell. An' I'll stop around while you're goin' with a whole arsenal o' shells that'll tell you not to dally. I'll foller later with the stuff at—twenty-five dollars to the ounce! An' I guess I'll leave it to any old scavengers roaming about this shore to clean up this mess you're leavin' behind you."

CHAPTER XVII

THE RETREAT

THE little seal-oil flame just contrived sufficient light to reach the limits of the tent. But there was no cheer in it. It was dull, depressing, and matched the mood of the red-headed creature sitting over the loyal sheet-iron stove that was doing its best with a careful sparing of precious driftwood.

Mary was thoughtfully gazing down at it, and nothing in her pretty face gave inkling of her mood. The lurking smile of her big eyes was there in their depths. But that, too, told nothing. It was always there.

Her arm was linked as usual under one of Andy's where

they sat there together. Somehow, her attitude gave an impression of something maternally protective.

It was the end of the first long run on the homeward journey. They were camped in the heart of the frozen swamp barrens, without any sort of protection but the well-banked tent pitched in the deeps of the snow. Outside, the world was profoundly still. It was so still that the drawing stove sounded like the forced draught of a furnace. They made every mile of distance they could set between them and Big Waters before seeking rest.

It was not the result of Dutch Deazel's threat. Andy had urged—had urged to leave behind him as much of the memory of defeat as distance could make possible. And Mary had unhesitatingly fallen in with his mood. She had set her dogs at their task without mercy. And Benjie had supported her to the limit. Under other circumstances, Andy would have realized that they had achieved nearly two days' work in that first run. But his weight of depression and disappointment left him unheeding of the way not only the dogs but Mary had served him.

It was Mary, at last, who broke the silence that had become oppressive.

"How soon would you figure he'll make a start after us, Andy?" she questioned, thoughtfully, with her happy deference to the man's opinion. "He's got to pack that stuff down to his sled."

"Why, no time, I guess," Andy replied, moodily. "There wasn't a deal over two hundreds of it. He'd start in an hour, maybe."

Mary nodded.

"But he'd never make up on us," she said, contentedly. "He's got the best of Lola's dogs. But he won't dare push them. He won't be just making Whitewater, like us. He's going to miss the Fort. And he'll make right on down to Leaping Horse. You see, Dutch won't quit till he's made his trade, will he? He's not taking chances. Did you figure the worth of the bunch lying there for him?"

Andy blew smoke heavily and removed his pipe from his lips.

"Yep. I told him the bunch there was worth near a hun-

dred thousand dollars." He laughed, without mirth. "I wanted him to make his getaway. You see, maybe the rest of Dad's millions are stored elsewhere."

Mary turned a ready smile on the solemn profile.

"My! That was bright of you, Andy," she cried eagerly. "That's likely so. Yes. It wouldn't be safe storing it in one place. Now, why didn't I think of that? When Dutch is away with that bunch we can go right back, and ——"

"But he—he beat us for a brace of darn fools!" Andy suddenly exploded. "That's what sets me raving mad! Oh, kid! And I reckoned I was smart—*I* was a match for a rotten gunman! I figured I could play the game as good as my old dad did, and just fool 'em. It makes me hot. I—I just feel I could cry like a kid."

Mary squeezed the arm to which she was clinging.

"Me, too," she said. "But it wasn't you he beat, Andy, dear," she went on, softly. "There was just one half-wit to this outfit who made defeat for us. Daddy Dan was right—dead right in the thing his old head figured. You—you threw everything right down to—to save me! Oh, Andy! You did it for me! And even if it had been the millions you'd have still done it just the same!"

Andy turned. And for the first time since they had fled from Big Waters Mary saw a lightening in the blue eyes she loved. He shook his head.

"You can't make a hero out of a fool image," he said, bitterly. "I had to throw things down to save myself lying around there with all Benjie left of that dead fish, Jean. Dutch was right out for a killing if he didn't get the thing he needed. No, you can't pass me any halo, kid. I'm the best, star, fool man that never shone."

Mary shook her head, and her glorious eyes were meltingly tender.

"You can't put that over with me, Andy," she denied, with a prim little pursing of her lips. "You didn't do it to save yourself. You were just asking for a killing till they started in to strip my body. Then you squealed—right away. I know. And I don't want—ever—to forget. You threw down—millions for me!"

Andy hugged the arm under his. And then, of a sudden,

he laughed outright. His laugh was full of all the old mirth Mary was seeking.

"Not millions, kid," he denied. "Just a few thousand dollars. If there'd been millions there I'd say you'd be an elegant ice statue right now."

Mary was reveling in a heavenly content. She looked at Andy with all the impishness that was the very essence of her.

"Not with Benjie there," she retorted, slily.

Andy guffawed in a way that told Mary all was well again. But even in that happy moment a slight shiver passed over the girl's slim body, a wry little grimace twisted her pretty lips.

"When we were both kids, Andy," she went on. "I used to think it would be swell to kill, and—and have lots of blood. Someway, now, I don't seem to be able to get Jean out of my fool head. The thing Benjie did to him! It—it was awful! Terrible! It—it makes me feel so bad I —— You know," she added naïvely, "I don't guess I'm very brave, really."

Andy's eyes were very gentle as he looked into the troubled face. Then, of a sudden, they seemed to harden, and there came the ugly lifting of a lip that bared strong, even, white teeth.

"You don't have to feel that way, kid," he snapped. "Benjie's staked a claim in my heart that's his for just as long as I live."

It was almost as if the elemental furies had wearied of their ages-old pastimes, as if they had withdrawn to their Polar fastnesses with their lust for hurt satiated. Perhaps they were content with the failure which Andy and Mary had made in their big adventure. Perhaps they were lying somewhere back of the blaze of aurora derisively looking on at the hasty retreat from their jealously guarded domain.

At any rate, for days the awesome stillness of the frozen world remained. There was no storming, and not a cloud arose to obscure the precious winter light that more than half filled the darkened dome of the heavens.

Cold? Yes. The cold was well-nigh desperate. It was that

deadly, still cold which seems to deepen with every added hour of windlessness. But for Mary and Andy it had few terrors. It was the common condition of the northern life to which they had been bred. And they, like their dogs, accepted it without complaint. They had light and no storm, and they asked no better.

But neither of these children of the North were under illusion. The chances—the risks—the deadly dangers besetting: well enough they knew them to be running with them in a neck and neck race. Every day, every hour, every mile of the way, it was impossible to say what the next might bring forth in a world where, in a matter of minutes, blinding storm could rush down at them off the Polar ice. Mary, at least, knew the lesson of it well—speed, and the sparing of food and fuel. But far more important still, the care of her beloved dogs, their feet no less than their lean bellies.

So, within four days, the swamp barrens were left behind them. They had made the deep, frowning gorge lying north of Whispering Lake and traversed its length. And their haste to reach the region of "devil-devil" might have suggested that they found the lake, with its mysterious chatter of voices, to be the most desirable camping-ground on earth.

It was at the moment of debouching from the gorge, when they found themselves listening again to those strange voices that were never wholly silent, and their far-searching eyes looked out over the stark white plain of frozen waters, which, under the blaze of northern lights, seemed to reach out to the very confines of the world, that the first untoward incident of the journey occurred. It was Benjie.

It was queer. They had scarcely passed out of the shadows of the granite wall of the gorge when Benjie flung up his wolfish muzzle and stood like a hound at fault. He stood with a paw up-raised and his great head turned. His upstanding ears were twitching, and Mary knew that the dog was listening. As the leader came to a stand the team dropped crouching in the snow and the sled was halted. And Mary smiled around at Andy who had closed in beside her.

"He's heard 'devil-devil,'" she laughed.

Then she called to the dog. She mushed him. She mushed the team, contentedly gnawing at the ice that coated their

great paws. But neither Benjie nor the others took the slightest notice. Instead the leader had faced about, and his fierce eyes shone like angry green coals of fire. He was eyeing the gorge from which they had just emerged.

"It's not 'devil-devil,'" Andy said. "It's—behind us."

Mary suddenly passed ahead armed with her gee-pole. And as she reached the rebellious dog, Benjie was snarling, and the lift of his lips bared his great fangs. Mary laid a mittened hand on his frost-rimmed head. She smoothed it caressingly, as she talked to him.

"What's amiss, boy?" she asked, gently. "What's worrying you? Is it 'devil-devil'?"

For answer, the dog's snarl deepened to a deep-throated growl, and Mary felt the rise of his bristling mane under her hand.

The girl took the line of the dog's stare. Yes. It was the mouth of the gorge. But she could see nothing—nothing to account for the shiver of canine tension she felt in the creature's body.

For some moments she stood listening to the rise and fall of the whispering voices, and to the growl of the dog. Then she took the wolfish head between her mitts and spoke chidingly.

"You know we got to make home, boy," she said, gently. "And we can't, with you standing around acting foolish. You've just got to forget it. Now, you feller!" she added, in a sudden sharp command. "Beat it! Mush! And—and don't stop for fool argument."

The effect was instant. With a snatch Benjie freed himself from the caressing hands and charged back at the resting team. In a moment he had them on their toes, and the sled went hissing over the snow. Then he raced ahead, and, with his low-dropped muzzle searching the snowy trail, he headed across the lake.

"It's Dutch, I guess," Mary called to Andy, as she swung into her stride at the tail of the sled. "He's back of us. Maybe he's making through the gorge. That dog knows. And he's mad. He hates. Benjie's heard, or scented, or—or something. It's the wolf in —— Hark!"

Mary's final exclamation had nothing to do with Benjie or Dutch. It was the "whisper." The hushed chatter had leaped in volume. It had changed its character completely. It had become a rumble of distant thunder, and it was broken with little stabs of sound like magnified gunshots. The bombardment went on for some moments while the dogs ran on with ears queerly laid. Then it dropped again to the chatter that had been lost.

Again came Mary's call to Andy.

"I—I think I'm scared, Andy," she said, and laughed. "I ——" She broke off, pointing ahead with her gee-pole. "Look! Look at Benjie!"

It was a strange canine reaction to the thunderous growl that had just passed. Benjie swung out and circled back. His wolfish ears were laid like the ears of the other dogs, and his lank tail was curled under. He came with a rush. And his snarls were savage. Each dog in the team felt the slash of his merciless fangs, not once, but several times. They were torn with reckless savagery, and the old dog contrived to communicate his mood through the onslaught. There was a leap forward of scurrying feet and a fog of snow-dust rose thickly as the whole team charged forward in a headlong rush.

Mary's eyes shone with a reflection of the northern lights.

"Benjie's scared, too," she cried. And she laughed again.

But Andy made no reply. He was listening intently and striving with all the knowledge he possessed to understand the thing that was going on about him. But the meaning of it defeated him. All he could do was to listen stupidly, while the ominous growling of it came again and grew in volume.

"We should see the rock. I guess we're more than half-way," Mary called to him presently.

Andy realized the anxiety of it. And he came as close as the spread of snowshoes permitted him.

"Don't worry, little kid," he said. Then he grinned. "It's just 'devil-devil.' We'll make camp under the rock all right. Your old Benjie'll see to that. Gee! He's setting a gait. I —— Say, that's fire!"

He flung out an arm pointing ahead at a spot of light twinkling on the low line of the dim horizon.

Mary stared out for some silent moments. Then, with sharp finality:

"Dutch!" she exclaimed. "He's made ahead of us."

"He's behind," Andy denied on the instant. "Benjie's let nothing pass him."

"No. He just never could have passed. But—that's a camp. It's at the foot of our rock. You can see it now. The rock, I mean. It's coming clear. See! The sheen on its snowy head."

Mary was pointing. She spoke with an excitement that told of her feelings, her dread of the booming lake whose reverberations had now become almost continuous.

"I can see figures moving," Andy said. "There's more than one."

"Three—I make it."

"Then that settles it. Dutch's still behind us. I wonder who ——"

Andy broke off. An ear-splitting crash seemed to flash its way across the lake. It came from somewhere behind, and it seemed to die out far ahead. The ice under foot was rocking.

Andy thought of those ice mountains of which Mary had told him, and instantly his whole mind and desire became centered upon the staunch shelter of the grim old rock ahead. They were nearing it. The dogs were racing in a fashion that needed no urging by their leader. They, too, wanted that shelter. There ahead was the solid ground of the lake shore, while under foot was ice—quaking ice—and what?

In that moment something of the true meaning of things came to Andy. Knowledge had supplied a key to those whispering voices so suddenly translated into thunderous boomings and detonations, and—and rocking ice. But until the shore was reached, and he could view the phenomenon which ——

"It's Oolinak! And Daddy Dan!" Mary shrilled at him, excitedly.

And then came the faint sound of a hail from the shelter

of the rock. It was little more than a whisper in the general tumult that was roaring about them.

They were in the shelter of the old sentry rock built of granite, on unmovable foundations of granite that had stood since the world began. They had reached safety, and the quaking ice was left behind them.

Mary, with Andy close beside her, and with her dogs sprawled in the snow at her feet, was gazing at those who had been waiting at their camp-fire to receive her. Her dread of the booming lake had passed, that dread which had been driven into her soul by the amazing manifestations she had witnessed on an earlier journey.

Father Dan was smilingly regarding her out of his enveloping furs. Oolinak, crouching over the lavish fire he had built, gazed up at her with his grinning, dog-like devotion. Then there was that other in his policeman's sheepskin, and with the vivid yellow cap badge standing sharply out against the black of his furs. All unconsciously, the sight of these unexpected friends, stirred a profound sense of relief in Mary. She drew a deep breath, and the thunders rolling over the frozen lake were almost forgotten.

"But you, Daddy?" she cried. "And Oolinak? And—and Sergeant Spence? I don't ——"

"That's so, Mary, girl," Father Dan smiled, while his gaze sought the thundering distance of the lake. "We had to make it. Spence agreed. It was Jean Duchette saw you and Andy pull out. He and Dutch were hot on your trail. It was Oolinak's quick eyes saw him. I just did what I could. Oolinak and I could have pulled out right after them. I've thought since it would have been best. But you were away, and I knew they wouldn't head you till you made Big Waters. I wanted the law. Spence was at Good Hope. So Oolinak got him while I fixed this outfit. But tell me—Big Waters? What happened?"

"They pulled the game on us!"

Andy's eyes were grinning. But his announcement contained a world of bitterness.

"They got away with the—stuff?"

Sergeant Spence flashed his inquiry without abandoning his search of the distance of the lake.

"Oh, yes. Dutch is there behind us somewhere hauling Father's cache of a hundred thousand dollars of pure ambergris. He played me for the world's best mush-head. And it's a guess how we got here alive."

"Then that'll be him right now!"

Spence was pointing. He was pointing far out where the aurora glare was softened to a queer silvery sheen at something infinitely small and dark and moving in the immensity of the lake spread. It was there, there was no mistake. And every eye turned in its direction.

Recognition was instant. Far out on the center of the lake, somewhere midway across the ice, there was a running team of dogs hauling a laden sled. And behind it was the dark figure of the man mushing it.

The police officer gave no outward sign for all his wonder and speculation at the thundering detonations which told of splitting ice in a temperature of sixty below zero! The thing was beyond anything his years of experience had ever taught him. He stood there watching, apprehensive, expectant.

Father Dan, too. He knew the thing Mary had told him of the lake. He knew the weirdness of its reputation. So he watched, expectant. Just then the moving team out on the middle of the ice was of small concern.

And Mary? All the spirit of the girl was up on its toes. The lake and its mystery of thundering voices was forgotten. She shot a glance at the desperately frowning face of Andy, and remembered only that Dutch was out there with the treasure he had stolen from them at Big Waters.

In those moments Mary's feelings were out of control. Her quick mind had leaped back to that grim moment when she had seen mountains of ice piled high for a brief moment where now a far-reaching, unstable white plain stretched out. And she wanted to see it again. Now! Now! Now! It was no concrete thought. No expressed desire even to herself. But somewhere in her she knew that that was so. And she knew that she *would* see it.

It happened while yet the silence of watching the dark

uncertain movement of running dogs held the watchers. It came with just that culminating crash which Mary had likened to the gathering of all the thunder in the world. It was deafening, ear-splitting. It seemed to rock the whole world, even the granite beds on which they were standing, and which had endured throughout the world's ages.

Mary's hands flung up to her ears. But the men stood stock-still almost as though incapable of movement. Oolinak hugged his knees and buried his face so that he should not see.

It rose swiftly—a glittering, gray, riven mass under a light that flashed about it like streaking lightning. It went up, up—yes, in precisely the manner Mary had told. Mountains—a range of miniature mountains reaching the confines of the lake from northwest to southeast—a gray, shining range of ice mountains. And the booming of it was terrific.

Then creaking, crashing, groaning, just as it had arisen out of the deeps of the lake, it returned to them.

The speed of its going was no less than that of the upheaval. And in minutes only the titanic vision had passed. Flat and gleaming, the lake once more spread out, leaving the still air heavy-laden with an odor it had not possessed before.

The running team? The dark moving figure? No, the flat spread of the lake's bosom was unbroken. There was no sign upon it of any living thing.

The little tent was pitched close against the stout police tent which housed Father Dan and the policeman. They were close in under the lee of the sentry rock banked heavily with the dry, frozen snow. The little sheet-iron stove was glowing almost furiously under a prodigal expenditure of Mary's hoarded fuel.

Mary and Andy were side by side facing it. Father Dan was sitting cross-legged on Mary's own rolled sleeping bag. Sergeant Spence was nearby to the door with its laced curtain secured behind him. And the little seal-oil lamp was there beside him for any attention it might need.

The tent was warm with a luxurious heat which left the cold outside a world apart. The soft yellow rays of the oil

lamp did their best in competition with the pipes of Andy and the policeman, and Father Dan.

Father Dan had had no part in the talk which had been going forward since the food which Oolinak had prepared had been disposed of. He had simply remained a listener while Andy told the whole story of Big Waters.

Spence had appealed to Mary in the first instance, and the fact that this was so had brought a swift twinkle to the eyes of Father Dan. But the girl had set the matter right in her own characteristic fashion. She had negatived the idea of her leadership with prompt decision.

"You see, Sergeant," she had demurred, with a prim pursing of her pretty lips, "my husband knows it all. I can only tell you the things that happened to Jean Duchette."

It was the reference to "my husband" that conjured the officer's smile. The set of his face relaxed and he nodded.

"Sure, Mrs. Forsyth," he agreed. "We'll have your husband's story. And I need it all. Things happened up there." And he mentioned that only Dutch was returning with the ambergris.

"Thank God!"

Andy grinned something defiantly at the representative of the law. Then he forthwith embarked on an exact and comprehensive story.

Sergeant Spence listened almost without comment. Here and there he flung in a sharp question to clear up some obscure point. But that was all. Andy told everything right up to the moment of Mary's call for help, and of his finding Jean dead with his throat torn out, and the dog Benjie crouching over the body. And then, as he paused, Spence turned to Mary.

"Will you tell me, Mrs. Forsyth?" he said, smiling in spite of himself as he caught the lurking mischief in Mary's eyes.

"If you need it." Mary sat up. She looked straight into Spence's eyes. And her own were challenging. "Andy's told you I yelled like a fool kid for help. He didn't tell you I yelled to Benjie, and the dogs curled asleep in their snow burrows. I yelled to them and—meant it."

Spence nodded and his smile had passed.

"And a right smart judge, too," he agreed.

For some moments he contemplated the two figures sitting with their arms linked in the intimate fashion that was their way. Then he knocked out his pipe and turned to the recumbent missionary.

"You know, Father Dan, I guess you did a right smart thing sending down for me on the rush," he said. "Maybe this boy an' girl don't get the measure of things exactly. There's a bit of a she wolf down there at Whitewater, who had a son, and a hired man, whom she sent up to Big Waters. And she hasn't got either of them now. Nor has she got a hundred thousand dollars of ambergris, which might have compensated her. She wolves are a pretty bad proposition to be up against. 'Specially when their young get hurt. You see, these two were up at Big Waters at the same time. They've come back. And the others—haven't."

Mary was regarding the ruddy sides of the stove. Andy was watching the steady-eyed policeman. Father Dan nodded.

"Murder!" he said, quietly.

"That's the way a she wolf would say."

"But Mary was bound and helpless. I was with Dutch—showing him."

It was Andy, and his eyes were full of concern for Mary.

"Sure." Spence turned again to Father Dan. "The thing I need is to go right on up to Big Waters," he said. "It looks like I need to commandeer your man, Oolinak, and your team. You can make back to your Mission with these —kids. I've seen that rotten gunman get what was coming to him. And I'd say Nature for once acted square and handed out a right deal. If I locate a dead man with his throat torn out by some beast of this wilderness, why, it should make a swell report to headquarters. And it'll draw the fangs of that she wolf."

Father Dan sat up.

"I'll be glad, Spence," he said, with a sigh of relief. "You can have all the outfit you need, and the world's finest trailman in Oolinak as well. You surely can. And my grateful thanks."

Spence nodded in his sober, unemotional fashion, and re-lit his pipe with a hot cinder from the stove. Andy looked

across at him. His freckled face was grinning with great cordiality.

"I can hand you something to make that report sweller," he said. "Something that ought to make mighty big for you with the folks who count with a policeman."

Spence sucked at his pipe. But a keen look of intrigued inquiry regarded the red head and freckled face.

"That sounds swell," he said, quietly.

"Swell?" Andy laughed with irrepressible humor. Mary and Father Dan watched him curiously. "There's the world's greatest oil sump right at the door of this tent. You see, I'm a mining engineer. I specialized on oil to be like my father. I guessed it was oil set this lake whispering all the time. But I know now. I don't need to tell you the science of it. But the thing that buried Dutch and a hundred thousand dollars of my ambergris was the action, the chemical action, of an oil seep so big, breaking into the bottom of this lake, that its gasses could blow out millions of tons of solid ice. One day this lake'll be Canada's biggest oil-field. And you're the prospector who's found it. I'm glad to hand you that as a present for your report. And I pass my word you're the only man in the world who knows about it."

CHAPTER XVIII

MARY PRESENTS HER BILL

A CHEERFUL blaze illuminated the Mission living room. The sight of it, the sense of it were things to fill weary homecomers with a rare content.

Jane Hesther had surpassed herself. But then she would. From the moment the "yep" of Mary's dogs had reached her, to their final housing and feeding, Jane Hesther had spared herself not at all.

Her "good Boss" had returned to her without the awesome figure of the law's representative dogging his heels. Mar-ee, her "little Mar-ee," had brought back with her the "red-head" she had helped her to marry, and no hurt had befallen either of them. Then Oolinak? Well, Oolinak

was still away with the responsibility of the policeman on his capable hands. Oolinak was a great man on the trail. Jane Hesther liked to remember that. And, anyway, Oolinak had hauled her all the wood she needed for her winter supply.

So she had hastily filled and polished Father Dan's oil lamp and set it alight. She had piled the hearth fire with a blazing, crackling, spluttering lavish of resinous pine, and she had set out a mess of hot food, and hot tea, and stood over these "crazy" whites whom she adored, until they were physically incapable of consuming more.

Now the Eskimo was somewhere in her kitchen crooning her contentment over her work of cleaning. Father Dan was at his little table writing. Andy and Mary were on the dust-dry floor, still clad in their trail clothing, basking in the furious heat of the burning pine as though they could never get enough of it.

Mary was curled up close against Andy's side. Her fair head was propped against a broad shoulder, and her eyes were closed. Andy was squatting. He was smoking and clasping his knees, and he was quite unmoving lest Mary's apparent slumber should be disturbed.

It looked as though reaction had no place with any of them unless it were in Mary's closed eyes, and the obvious heat-worship of the two crouched up to the fire. Yet the journey from Whispering Lake had called upon every ounce of the physical resources of them all. It had started to storm as they left the lake. And so it had continued until Benjie had brought them to the door of the Mission. It was still blowing a gale outside the stout old walls, nor was there any sign of its abatement.

Andy removed his pipe from his mouth and cautiously turned his head. He glanced down at the fair face pressed against his shoulder. For a brief moment he regarded the pretty, windstained cheeks and the closed eyes. He watched the easy breathing, the gentle rise and fall of the slim, rounded bosom. Then he turned his happily grinning eyes back to the fire.

In that moment he knew that nothing else mattered in his life but Mary. Failure? Yes, he had failed. That was

true enough. But no one else had succeeded. It had been failure, defeat all around for everyone, except—Mary. Mary alone had done as she set out to do. Big Waters—the cave—she had led them to them. That had been her contribution to the great adventure.

Mary had trained herself, taught herself. She had trained her dogs and set herself to learn that she might help him, Andy, when he needed. This slim, loyal, generous-hearted creature had simply thought, and thought, and thought of him, for him, for years. And she had been ready and waiting for him at the moment of his return to Whitewater.

He grinned into the heart of the fire.

Mary! But as long as he could remember it had always been the same. His was always the promise, the boast. Mary just did. The appeal of his thought was tremendous, and he wanted to laugh outright in his joy that this pretty, fair-haired, queerly determined little creature was now actually his wife. He wanted to wake her. Roughly, as he would have done in those early days. He wanted to banter her, and draw forth her swift and pointed retort. But he did nothing but sit stock-still grinning and smoking so that Mary's sleep, if she were asleep, might remain undisturbed.

Father Dan glanced around from his writing. He saw the happy attitude of the two figures, and his eyes twinkled. Then he went on with his work. He wrote on for some silent minutes while the storm outside screamed about the building. Then he laid his pen aside and read what he had written. It was his own personal report of events, which would augment the police report to headquarters. He folded it and spoke over his shoulder.

"You won't be able to quit till the ice goes out, Andy," he said, abruptly, warningly, as though there had been a decision of an early departure from the region. "Anyway, you'll need to wait for Spence to get along back. He's checking you up. If he locates Jean the way you left him maybe there won't be—complications. But you left Dutch behind you. And you just can't tell. No, you'll need to stop around."

"Why not?"

Andy had removed his pipe and was looking around at the man whom he regarded as his second father.

"Eh?"

Father Dan swung about on his stool. There was an eager light in his searching gaze.

"Why quit anyway?" Andy said.

"You want to stop around? You two?"

Father Dan was looking into the vivid blue eyes, and a great surge of feeling stirred him. Somehow, he had felt that these two, these two whom he had married, would demand the natural expression of their youth.

All the way on that long trail home from Whispering Lake he had reviewed the future as he conceived it must inevitably be. Andy had come to Whitewater for an expressed purpose. He had come for that heritage his father had left to him. He had come for—Mary. He had been to Big Waters, and had failed to recover his father's treasure. Mary? Yes, Mary was his. With these things so, Father Dan could see only one course open to them—the world, the bright lights of civilization to replace the benighted darkness of the outlands. He had contemplated an utter and complete loneliness for the work that was his. He had firmed himself to the contemplation of it. No sacrifice, he felt, was too great to make for the happiness of these two. And now ——?

"But there's nothing here now for you, boy," Father Dan gestured. He spoke as though urging. "I mean, nothing to hold you here. Nothing makes it so you *ought* to stop around. Then there's your—folks. And Mary?" He paused, gazing into the fire. "She's got to see the world with you. She's got to know the things I've never been able to show her. It's—it's her right! You've the means for that to your hand ——"

"But maybe not the will, Uncle Dan."

The grin in Andy's eyes was full of affectionate regard for the big-hearted man gazing down at him from his stool. Andy knew what their going would mean to him. He blew smoke heavily. Then he removed his pipe. For one instant he glanced around at Mary. He saw a flicker in her closed eyelids and turned again to Father Dan.

"Mary's so busy asleep and snoring I guess I best not wake her. So I'll just hand you the thing I got back of my head while she can't hear. I've a real swell notion."

He chuckled. And Father Dan's eyes twinkled responsively.

"You know, Uncle," he said. "I'm not a lot sure Mary's yearning for my—folks, and the world you weren't ever able to show her. Mary's queer, someways. I don't guess she's ever got over being a kid yet. So I need to humor her. You know, when we were kids, she was crazy for the trail. Crazy for 'rich strikes.' Crazy for blood—lots of blood. Well, she can't get these things down in Montreal and Toronto. Can she? She can't get lots of blood around Ottawa. They—they wouldn't stand for it. They'd set her into the foolish place and keep her there. I don't want her set in any foolish place—yet. So I figure we'll stop around here where there isn't one, and make trail together."

"You want to carry on your profession from here?"

Andy nodded. And his grin had gone.

"That's so," he said, seriously. "You see, Uncle, those folks don't really matter, do they? And Mary's not yearning. Dad and Mother are still—here. And you? Mary belongs to you. Then why not? There's Big Waters," he went on, with a wry grimace. "There's always Big Waters. There's the world's wealth of oil at Whispering Lake. Then there's thousands of miles of the world's oldest territory shouting for us to come along and get a look. Why not?"

Father Dan stood up. He moved across to the fire carrying his stool with him. He set it down beside Andy, and rested a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm glad, boy," he said, with a profound sigh, and his big fingers squeezed affectionately. "That's your swell notion?"

Andy looked up.

"Part of it, Uncle."

"And the rest?"

"Why, the old home up-river."

"You mean—for you two?"

Andy nodded.

"I'm crazy for it," he cried, his freckled cheeks flushing

in his eagerness. "There it is. Just as we lived in it, and all shut up. It's ours. Why not? I can send down for all the things we need to make it into a real home, and when Mary needs to get out and see things, why, we can shut it up—and then come along back again. She can raise and train her dogs there. We can head out in any old direction any old time. And, as I said, come back again. But the big idea, Uncle Dan, is, we aren't going to quit—you!"

"There, Andy, boy, I always guessed you weren't so foolish!"

Mary's eyes were wide open. She was smiling up at the red head above her. But now an arm was linked under one of his and she was hugging it.

"We'll go along when it quits storming and open it right up," she gurgled, delightedly. "My! Our home! That'll be the biggest 'strike' ever!"

It was a quaint home-seeking.

Sheathed in furs almost to their eyes, Andy and Mary, with Benjie sedately accompanying them, advanced upon the securely barricaded home of the man's early childhood. Andy was armed with an axe and a heavy hammer. Mary was shouldering an iron crowbar to wrench away the heavy timber with which every window and door had been sealed up.

Storming had ceased, and the world about them was hushed and frigidly still. The cold was intense, but the heavenly lights were streaking the sky from horizon to horizon. The solitude of it all, as they tramped the snow of the river foreshore, was almost awesome. But the sense of it was wholly lost upon the home-seekers. Andy was all eager joy for this little culmination of a new life. And Mary? Mary was a-thrill with an emotion that held her well-nigh speechless and something dazed.

As they came to the old familiar doorway, facing down on the broad expanse of the frozen river, and started tearing down the barricades, her one desire in life was to laugh—to laugh absurdly, crazily.

But she did not laugh. She remained quite silent, laboring with all her might while Benjie looked on. Her one idea,

her one longing, was to make their entrance into that home which was to be theirs.

It was Andy who prized the nailed woodwork and Mary whose slim, tenacious hands tore it from its loosened fastenings and flung it aside with complete recklessness. It could not be cleared away from the door too quickly to satisfy her mood.

At last sufficient clearance had been made, and she flung open the door that was revealed. She led the way into the old living room they had known in childhood's days. The blazing arc of aurora yielded a measure of light through the open doorway. But it was insufficient. She at once turned on Andy, who had followed her, and was standing leaning on the crowbar she had brought.

"We can't see a thing without more light, Andy," she said, in a tone of disappointment. "We didn't bring kerosene either. Now why didn't we fetch a can of kerosene?"

Andy laughed down into the solemnly questioning eyes.

"Search me, kid."

Mary gazed about her, peering into the shadows of the little old room. She seemed to be pondering the awkwardness of the situation. Finally, she stood regarding the window which had been boarded on the inside for greater safety.

"I know, Andy, dear," she cried, as though with inspiration. "You beat it along to Trudie's old kitchen and rip open the windows there. There's two, I guess. I seem to recollect them. Then you can just hunt around and maybe you'll find kerosene in the old drum they used to keep there. I'll tear out these timbers from the window right here. If you get the oil we can fill the lamps. They're still here. My! Won't it be great fixing this shack up right! Say, boy, we never figured to fix a home together when we were kids, did we?"

Andy laughed.

"We took that for granted, you silly kid! Folks can't get married without fixing a home. It's queer standing around here after all these years, though. I ——"

"You beat it and go open up that kitchen," Mary cried, urgently. "Not the door, just the two windows, so you can see."

Andy went off with ready docility. But it was always so. When Mary ordered it seemed to him he never had enough hands or speed to obey the way he wanted to.

Mary stood there in the ghostly half light. Her slim body was lost under her heavy fur parka. Her glorious eyes were wide, and big, and shone vividly as they gazed after her man. And when he had passed into the inner bedroom out of her view she still stood looking after him. She made no attempt to tear open the window, as she had promised.

In all her life Mary had never endured such moments as she was living through then. Such rapturous, maddening excitement! Her heart was pounding in her bosom, and a crazy desire to fling herself down and scream possessed her. But she remained quite still, listening, listening.

After awhile the sounds she was listening for came to her. She heard Andy's heavy blows. She heard the ripping and splitting of wood. Then she heard the clatter of wood being flung down with vigorous, careless hands. It went on. The sounds were repeated again and again. Then, of a sudden, they ceased abruptly.

Mary clung with all her strength to the great axe she was holding while she listened. Then it came. It came with a shout. It came in just the manner she wanted it to. It was in the same old rough fashion she knew and loved. And as the harsh tones of it reached her she was back again in the old days of their childhood again.

"You little devil!" Andy shouted. "You come right here! Quick! Do you hear? Or I—I'll fetch you by the scrag of your darn neck!"

Mary gave one little gurgling chuckle of delight. Then she leisurely strolled her way into Trudie's old kitchen.

Andy's fur cap was thrust back off his forehead and a great tuft of hair had fallen over his freckled brow like a scarlet forelock. He was still clutching the crowbar with both hands and leaning on it. His wide blue eyes were staring at a huge stack of ambergris that half filled Trudie's old kitchen.

The pad of Mary's moccasined feet ceased close beside him. But he did not look around. His amazed eyes were

literally glued to the vast stack of priceless treasure so carefully packed up. Suddenly he flung out a hand pointing.

"That!" he cried. "For God's sake!"

Mary took a firm grip of herself.

"That? Oh, that," she said, with a perfect assumption of indifference. "Oolinak and I bunched it there 'cos we reckoned it would be safer. I guessed folks would never suspect."

Andy flung down his crowbar and turned. He reached out, and his big hands caught the girl by the loose of her parka. He dragged her to him, and held her by the shoulders facing him.

"You queer, clever, artful little demon!" he cried, exultantly. "I'm going to kiss you because I can't help myself!"

They were sitting side by side on the rusty top of Trudie's old cook-stove. Mary was still clasping the great axe which seemed to afford her moral as well as physical support. One of Andy's arms was flung across her fur-clad shoulders. They sat there silently gazing at the piled mass of treasure while Benjie slumbered against Mary's moccasined feet. The grin in Andy's vivid eyes was a wonderful thing. Mary's had owlish solemnity relieved by that little lurking smile that told so much.

"For God's sake, say something, you fool kid," Andy cried, at last. "You sit there like some darn image with me half crazy wanting to know. How? You never knew. You didn't know ambergris from Jane Hesther's hash. There's two tons there if there's an ounce. It's millions, sure. It's all crazy to me, anyway. Millions!"

Mary studied the freckles for a silent moment. Then came her inevitable chuckle.

"'Course I didn't know. I didn't need to. I just had to use the sort of sense Dutch and Simon and Lola didn't worry with."

Andy shook his head.

"I still don't get a thing," he said.

Mary edged closer to him.

"It's foolish easy," she insisted. "It was that bunch of stuff in the wood-store. I got a look at it by chance. And I

guessed it was driftwood, or—or something. Some way, it sort of worried me. And I got that Bible, and thought about what your dad had done in it. That bird. That upside-down V. I guessed it was a cave. I guessed about the bird roost. Anyone would—you did right away. I fixed it right away to locate that cave, anyway, against you came back. I had to make it before any freeze-up because of the birds. I had to make it while they were there. So I got Daddy Dan to let me make it with Oolinak.

"He let me," she went on, after a smiling pause. "I found that cave right away and hunted it. And when I hunted it I found that ledge massed up with—with driftwood. Then I sort of got laughing crazy. You see, I knew those toughs could never locate anything but driftwood in your dad's outfit. I knew that driftwood in the wood-store had been all lashed up in a rubber sheet, which seemed foolish. So I just got a laughing fit. And I said, if your dad fancied hauling nothing but driftwood around this territory, and had such a pile of it stored, it looked like I might act the same.

"Then I thought hard. I sort of started in to plan. I planned the whole way back home. It looked like no one would worry with a fool girl getting around on the river, or with her dogs. Then I knew Jean and Dutch hated the winter trail like a Caribou Eater hates the Yellow Knife. So I planned to take a whole winter hauling that—that driftwood. I'd go out in storm, and get back in storm. And they wouldn't know. I'd take it right away to this old shack and store it. No one but Oolinak would know. Then I figured when you came up you'd locate your treasure. And if it wasn't this stuff then I wouldn't say a thing and let you see how I'd fooled myself. That's why I showed you what was in the wood-store, and left that sled-load up at Big Waters. You see, Andy, dear, I didn't know. I couldn't, till you came and told me. I—I just took a chance."

"Chance? Millions!"

Andy squeezed the slim shoulders to him.

"But you knew back of your mind, kid," he protested.

Mary smiled around at him.

"I'd a big hunch, Andy, dear. That's why I figured to

haul it in winter. I knew they'd trail you from the moment you got here. I knew they'd never let you get it. I knew they'd kill you rather. I just guessed if driftwood could hand you millions you should have all you wanted. So I toted it."

Andy flung back his head in a great laugh.

"Say, kid, you're just the greatest, craziest wonder in the whole wide world. It beats everything! The grit of it! The brightness! And—and—for me! Can you beat it?"

He laughed again. Then he sobered.

"You know, Mary, you make me want to laugh all the time. You planned all these things with me when we were bits of kids. The trail! Strikes! Getting married! Then blood! Jean's blood! It's all—all complete just the way we said! And ——"

Mary shook a solemn head.

"Oh, no, Andy, dear, it's not at all complete," she corrected, primly. "You see, you were to hire me and my dogs. And you were to pay me *good* money! Five dollars a trip! It took me five trips hauling this. One trip in the summer. And one trip with you. Seven trips. There, and back. That's fourteen. That's seventy dollars."

She held out a hand with the palm carefully pursed.

"Please, Andy, dear. Seventy dollars!"

Andy reached a pocket for his money-roll with a laugh of sheer delight. And Benjie, on the floor at Mary's feet, grunted his approval of the transaction.

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